

Echoes of Messatine

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/6234949) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/6234949>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Major Character Death , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	The Transformers (IDW Generation One)
Relationship:	Megatron/Terminus , Megatron/Orion Pax , Impactor/Megatron , Overlord/Megatron , Pharma/Ratchet , Drift Deadlock/Ratchet , Megatron/Optimus Prime , Jazz/Prowl , Jazz/Megatron/Prowl , Hound/Mirage
Character:	Megatron , Terminus - Character , Trepan , Orion Pax , Ratchet , Shockwave , Soundwave , Overlord , pharma , Ravage , Impactor , First Aid - Character , Jazz (Transformers) , Prowl (Transformers) , Starscream (Transformers) , Tarn (Transformers) , Bumblebee (Transformers) , Bluestreak (Transformers) , Cliffjumper (Transformers) , Hound (Transformers) , Mirage (Transformers) , Drift Deadlock , Optimus Prime
Additional Tags:	shadowplay , Torture , Mutilation , Non-Consensual Body Modification , Brainwashing , Reprogramming , Stalking , Medic megatron , Medical Horror , Medical Procedure , Classism , Dystopia , Functionists , Functionist universe is terrible , Body Horror , Learning Disabilities , Implied/Referenced Rape/Noncon , Attempted Rape , Murder , Crapsack World , Abusive Relationships , Emotional Abuse , Implied/Referenced Prostitution , Implied/Referenced Drug Use , Consensual Sex , Sticky Sex , Spark Sex , Spark Bonds , Lobotomy , Coercion , political machination , nonconsensual reformatting , Bullying , Harassment , Exclusion , Organized Crime , criminal activity , political turmoil , Revolution , repressive government , Medical School , look I give up this isn't a walk in the park , I definitely missed something or other but YOU GET THE IDEA , no dead babies in this one though
Stats:	Published: 2016-03-13 Completed: 2020-09-27 Chapters: 113/113 Words: 303863

Echoes of Messatine

by [MlleMusketeer](#)

Summary

Cybertron hurtles toward war, and only a handful of mecha see it. Not Megatron, whose inflammatory writings gain him agonizing attention from those on high. Not Ratchet, the Iacon Medical Center's most prized practitioner, whose Dead-End clinic remains the worst-guarded secret on Cybertron. Not Overlord, whose iron hold over Cybertron's underworld is beginning to falter. Not Orion Pax, whose concern over the sudden silence of one of his favorite writers drives him to take up his hero's pen. Not Terminus, who only wants to survive.

But Trepan and Senator Shockwave both know well what's coming. One aims to use a defiant miner's fall to crush the aspirations of the masses. The other wants to use that miner's triumph to ignite them. Neither much cares about Megatron himself, or his ultimate

survival.

Therein lies their fatal error.

Notes

I have taken considerable liberties with the timeline. This is a universe in which the events of Chaos Theory have simply not taken place, and Megatron and Orion Pax have yet to meet.

Also, secondary warning: This is really dark. This fic is filled with horrible things. Read the tags. The tags are as accurate as I can make them at this point. And unlike most of my fics, there is no slow build to the terribleness. It starts on the first page. Be warned, and flee if necessary.

Chapter 1

They called it shadowplay.

Now he knew why. Resisting was like trying to fight a shadow.

And throughout, throughout everything, the pain, the fear, the *wrongness*, was Trepan's thin, taunting voice.

"You don't know what to think," the mnemosurgeon said, and with the words, Megatron felt something of himself peeled off, flake away. He whined low in his throat, past even screaming. "We can fix that..." And then a pause, the invading touch settled and did not move further, and the golden optics above his widened with surprise. "Oho, what's this?"

He did not want to look up at his attacker. He did not want to give him any acknowledgement. But he couldn't move. He couldn't do anything to defend himself. All he could do was stare upward, helpless, at the mech who held everything he was in his hands.

And see him start to *smile*.

"Higher aspirations, is it?" the mnemosurgeon said. "They tell me you fancied yourself a poet. Well, how about some *poetic justice* today?"

The light, invasive touch became acid, ripping through his processor. Megatron screamed in raw agony.

"Full reprogramming does take a little longer," said Trepan. "But I have a feeling you'll find it worthwhile. You always did want to be a medic, didn't you?"

Things he had known his entire life slipped away, knowledge, understanding, and cold new things forced their way into their places. The stream of words, of descriptions, he'd always had sputtered to a stop. New words came in their place: fistulas, subdermal corrosion, debridement, rate of reproduction. His hands flared with pain, their sensitivity increased a thousandfold.

"A medic you shall be," said Trepan.

I don't understand! I don't understand! Stop!

"Remember," said Trepan above him and Megatron arched in the restraints, screaming, the world falling in on him in, suffocating. "Remember that you wanted this."

This was *such* a clever plan.

Well, not standard, but they'd appreciate someone making an example of Megatron of Tarn. Trepan smiled to himself. He wasn't the Council's favored mnemosurgeon just because of his skill. Political acuity, loyalty to the right people, and a certain *creativity* were all contributing factors. Not only could he perform the surgeries, but he could do them in the most advantageous way

possible to his patrons.

Who were, to a mechanism, outraged about the mech before him. The foolish little miner had been making such a nuisance of himself. Worse yet, he was intelligent. He *could* write, and write well, and even though they might stop his tracts at the source, copies would likely continue to be made. Primus, what a mess that would be.

They needed an example. A demonstration to the people that form always dictated function, no matter the mech's aspirations. Or delusions. Delusions, more likely. Someone needed to fail. Someone needed to fail spectacularly.

And why not use the writer of those very same tracts? Trepan laughed softly to himself as he worked. The unfortunate miner had fallen unconscious, pain, terror, the effects of ill-judged defiance. His dreaming brain was putty in Trepan's hands.

He loved this, wending through a processor, seeing a mech's every secret, hope, fear, fantasy, tweaking and changing his victims as he went. This miner wouldn't know what had happened to him. He'd wake with all his dreams fulfilled, a different life, and fall further than he'd ever imagined. Mining was a kinder life than that of a guttermech—the fate that awaited such failures. Hard to write in between selling yourself for fuel, for one thing.

Megatron, who had aspired so high, would be given all he wished by the unwise kindness of the Functionist Council, and fall. This would remind the rest of his ilk that staying within their function was in their best interests. No one would want to emulate him. The name Megatron would become synonymous with misfortune, hubris, humiliation.

He chuckled. He was giving Megatron a medic's processor. But there were errors. Perfectly natural errors, of course, they wouldn't look created to an outside eye, but enough to doom him. Just in case his own foolishness didn't do that first.

"Oh my dear little Megatron," he said aloud. "What an interesting life you're going to have. What's left of it, at least."

"The idealist is dealt with," said Trepan.

And so you mean to kill me, thought Terminus. He closed his optics. What happened now did not matter. Megatron had been such a bright thing, such a kind spark, and in losing him, they had lost their fight before it had even begun. He did not know if there was more he could have done. It didn't matter now, not with everything lost. Maybe someone would take up Megatron's writings. Maybe.

"I will require someone to keep an eye on him," said Trepan, and Terminus jolted as needles slid into his brain. He hissed through his vents, soft anger and pain. "You will be perfect. He trusts you. And you...well, of the two of you, I do believe you are the bigger problem. Megatron may have written those things, but you were the one who knew how to change them into the fuel for a revolution."

One I hope has caught, thought Terminus. *If we die, it will not die with us.*

"Oh, I'm perfectly aware of your hopes," said Trepan. After a moment, he chuckled. "Yes, this was

an even better idea than I thought. You get to watch your little protégé get everything he ever wanted, and destroy your precious revolution in the process. Better yet, he won't even know that he's undoing his life's work. But you—you *will*. And you will tell us how well it's going."

Confusion. Why so much effort? They could simply be shadowplayed, sent back to the mines to rot in obscurity.

"The mines offer too much autonomy, my dear Terminus. Who knows, Megatron might get it into his dear little processor to try his hand at something else damaging. No, much better to keep you two where we can watch you." He chuckled. "Much better to give Megatron everything he ever wanted and let him fail spectacularly. He'll have only himself to blame."

He didn't understand. All he knew was that it was bad. Something like Trepan wouldn't be happy otherwise.

Megatron did not deserve this.

Protective rage surged through him, hatred of the thought of this foul little creature touching Megatron, hurting him, violating his mind as casually as—

A snicker. "You really do care about him, don't you," purred Trepan. "Primus, but you're a fool. I suppose he's fond of you, too. He trusts you. You know that."

Pain. Violation. Something changing.

"So very much, the innocent thing that he is. I think you should know—he can't imagine you betraying him."

I won't betray him!

Trepan laughed. "We'll see about that. Enough talking. Time to get to work."

Terminus snarled under the gag. *One day*, he thought at the invasive touch through his mind, *one day, Trepan, you and yours will die for this*.

Trepan ignored him.

Chapter 2

Megatron sat up slowly, raising a hand to his helm, wondering if he pressed hard enough, he could do something about the awful processor ache seething there.

He stopped mid-gesture. His arm was the wrong color. White, not dark gray, and what had been a strip of hi-viz tape was now plain red paint. His hands were red as well.

“I don’t understand,” he said aloud, and headache forgotten, looked down at himself. No more blacks and grays. Reds and whites, a touch of blue on the edges of his pedes, his arms.

There was a mirror opposite him. He looked up at his reflection and jolted back. Not because they’d changed his helm—they hadn’t—but because the optics that looked back at him were blue.

Is that really me? he wondered, reaching for his reflection. He touched glass, red hand against red hand. No doubt.

There were medic’s insignias on his shoulders.

I don’t understand. He looked around, wracked his memory. There was nothing to explain this. No clue in the room around him. Blank pale walls and a mirror. *Is this a plot? Who would have done this to me?*

Miners didn’t wake up and find themselves medics. That would imply the Functionist Council had made a mistake. That would imply that form *didn’t* dictate function.

He swallowed hard. *I know I wanted it. I know I wanted it more than anything. But I’m a miner. I was constructed a miner. I’m not qualified, I don’t have the right—the right whatever it is that determines assignments!*

The thought didn’t feel right. He wasn’t sure why.

After a moment, he looked down again at his hands. *I want this*, he remembered. *I cannot shirk now.*

He wanted words to describe this, the confusion and fear and excitement too. They didn’t come. He sank back on the berth, looking at his hands. He wasn’t even sure what to think now.

The doors that he hadn’t even thought to open, to check if they were locked, slid aside.

“Hello, Megatron. Feeling better?”

“Feeling better?” The words felt strange. “I...I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“We believe you’ve demonstrated a remarkable aptitude for medicine,” said the mech. He was small, hardly came up to Megatron’s shoulder, his golden optics amused and kind. “I just finished a lengthy reformatting of your processor to ensure that you’ll be able to accomplish the tasks assigned to you.”

“I don’t understand,” said Megatron again.

“Your treatment of Terminus was most intriguing,” said the little mech. The doctor, Megatron guessed. “It demonstrated a certain potential. We have something of a problem, you see—those unfortunate enough to find themselves discontent in their work, as you were, and who cannot quite

fit into the great Cybertronian machine need a way in which to be satisfyingly resettled from their first assignment into one that will suit them better. You're experimental; we'll see if it can be done, and if so, we'll create a good, well-regulated application process."

"But why me?" He had been unhappy in his function, desperately unhappy, but he couldn't remember ever giving it voice. He simply remembered the spark-deep need to help, the agony over Terminus, not knowing what to do. Had he ever let it show?

The mech patted him on the arm. "Don't worry about things like that. You're not programmed for them."

He didn't like that, but he knew better than to say so. He looked down.

Another pat. Condescending. He didn't like it. "Cheer up, Megatron. It's what you've wanted your entire function."

He looked in the mirror again before he could stop himself. Unfamiliar optics stared back at him from his own face.

"Blue is a calming color," said the mech. "It'll help you function better in your new role."

"Yes," he said, a flat assent. He didn't know what else to say. He should be happy. He knew he'd wanted this—at least the ability to help his fellow miners. He'd seen mecha lose limbs, permanently, left so long without treatment that their autorepair would never accept a replacement. He'd seen them offline for lack of simple treatment. But could he be the one to repair them? It didn't seem right. So much of this didn't seem right.

Yes, he should want this.

Now he didn't, and he didn't even understand why.

"They slipped up."

Shockwave tilted his helm and raised an eyebrow, a silent query.

"They're going to make a demonstration," said his informant. The mech sounded like a computer through the vocal modulator changing his voice; unsettling, but necessary to his peace of mind. Certain people didn't take 'don't worry, they wouldn't dare touch me' as much of an assurance. Just as well. These days, Shockwave wasn't sure it was such an assurance.

He remained silent.

"There's a miner," said the informant. "We're not sure why. He's been reclassified and modified; a medic."

"A medic?" He too, wore a modulator. The news that Senator Shockwave was engaged in active sedition wasn't news he wanted out and about. Not if he wanted to remain capable of active sedition. "Who is this bot?"

“Megatron of Tarn,” said the informant, and Shockwave very carefully did not draw in a sharp vent. Megatron. The writer. Reformatted—of course they’d reformat him. He was likely no longer a writer.

But to turn him into a medic?

That did not seem typical of the Council.

“My source says they’re planning to have him fail the exams. Spectacularly. No one will take him as an apprentice after that. It’s to prove that us lower castes can’t handle intellectual work.”

“Interesting,” said Shockwave, thinking over what little he knew about the Iacon medical schools. Very little indeed; a year of training, he knew from Ratchet’s griping, exams, two to five years of apprenticeship.

He wasn’t sure what happened to failures. Nothing good, he imagined.

Particularly if the Council already had it out for the unfortunate spark.

“Very good. Thank you,” he said aloud. This would be a brilliant bit of propaganda if it succeeded for the Council. Give a miner everything he ever wanted and let him destroy himself. Or be destroyed by forces beyond his control.

There was nothing for it but to take an interest.

Chapter 3

The mech who had first spoken to him was named Trepan, and he had a great many important things to do. Megatron learned this quickly. Trepan did not have time for him.

That was what the rest of his escort was for.

They talked to him, told him about expectations, what the cities on Cybertron itself were like, as if he had never been there. He listened politely enough. He didn't want to anger them.

He couldn't recall ever in his function feeling so like prey, a petrorabbit among turbofoxes, always nervous, always watching, cooperating to remain safe. Maybe it was being aboveground, being expected to remain aboveground.

Surely he hadn't loved the mines so?

He didn't understand.

It frightened him. So much did these days. He wasn't sure he was himself. He wasn't sure what he could do about it.

They were helpful, at least. They'd found him housing, they said. And people to show him around. Ease the transition, just a little. Smiled at each other, condescending, and Megatron bowed his helm in assent, seething at being treated like a service droid, but too afraid to say anything. Self-disgust flickered at that, faded. He wanted to rebel. He was not a pet. But they might send him back, or worse. He wasn't sure what worse might be, but he couldn't face it.

A day later, they landed in Iacon.

Megatron stepped down off the transport with his escort flanking him. They felt confining, though he knew they were only there for his safety. Still, his plating prickled.

He looked around. It was big. And bright. He hadn't realized how dark Messantine had been until now. Or the smells. This seemed so clean. Bright, easy to move about in—

"I know it's rather a bit much," said one of his escort. "We'll be inside soon."

Megatron shook his head. "No, I'm fine." He looked around, spark whirling. He wanted—he wanted—it was too beautiful not to do something, not to find a way to express it, but his glossa clove to the top of his mouth, his mind clicked endlessly, like an engine in neutral, and there were no words, not even a slip of what he wanted to do. There was something, something, he knew it, the desire to paint this, to sing it, to—*something!*—but it slipped from his grasp as he reached for it.

"Come along." A hand closed around his elbow. "We'll get you settled in."

"Thank you," he said aloud, still staring, still wondering what to do with such beauty, such light.

They took him to the student housing of the medical school, undoubtably small and cramped by the standards of the students, but huge, decadent to him. He had a room to himself, a narrow berth (still wider than those he was accustomed to), a washracks, and, unimaginable luxury, a desk with a small shelf for his datapads.

A still more unimaginable luxury was the window. He went to it immediately, not caring about the

mocking glances of his guards, pressed a hand against it. There was so much light. He wondered if he would be able to recharge, didn't care, because there was something wondrous about looking out over the city like this from his own quarters.

"The energon dispensary is on the ground floor," said one of the mecha in the door. "We will collect you in the morning for your classes."

"Thank you," he said, still staring out over the city.

It was so *clean*. He looked down at himself with a frown. The white paint seemed wrong. Dirt would show up so easily on it. *Energon* would show up so easily. Did medics wear white to show they could afford to stay clean? Or so contaminations would show up?

It was strange. He was strange. And he dreaded meeting his peers. He had no illusions about how someone like him would be viewed, with suspicion, disdain, anger. His frame would be out of place, the treads on his back an obvious statement that he did not belong, that he was an imposter in their midst. They would not take kindly to that.

A flicker of defiant rage slipped into his thoughts, vanished as soon as it appeared. He quested after it. He needed it, it felt right, the half-vent of its presence made him feel like himself again. But it was gone.

He let out a long vent, sorry for its loss. Tried to collect himself again, calm the yammering of fear in his mind.

I will do this, he thought. It's needed. For all the mecha like me, seeking a better life, I have to succeed.

It helped. Not as much as he needed it to. But it helped.

To his surprise, he fell into recharge propped up in his window, and woke the next morning in scant time to collect his ration of energon from the dispensary. He fueled, ignoring the glances of the other mecha in the room, and went to meet his escort.

Jailers, said something in the back of his processor, like an echo, and he shook his helm to dismiss it.

They took him to the academy, and he was back to staring—the great white building at the edge of sight was the Iacon Medical Academy, and he had never been in something so grand before. It was very much like a temple, a frieze on one wall depicting a team of medics facing Mortilis, small and defiant, each with a hand upraised to bid the god halt. Mortilis stood uncertain in their face, threatening, but with one pede back, as if beginning to retreat.

Megatron felt his spark lift in determination.

The second medic from the front had a rough patch behind him, almost as if some part of his alt-mode kibble had been chipped away. Megatron's optics followed the curve of that rough patch.

That kibble could have been tank treads.

And it wasn't the only such patch.

His guards hurried him past, but he'd seen enough, and it let him straighten his shoulders. *Things haven't always been like this*, he realized as they went, and it felt as if he'd thought the same thought before, like something returning home to him. He couldn't imagine why he'd forgotten it. *Things haven't always been like this—and maybe, once, they were better.*

Pain twinged through his processor. He ignored it, dismissed it as anxiety, and looked more closely at his surroundings.

Bright. New. Very clean. Other mecha in red and white hurried through, looking at datapads, talking low and urgent among themselves. Almost all the optics around him were blue, and for the first time he thought of his own replaced optics with something other than hurt and anger. Was it a medical thing? He wished he dared to ask. He wished he could ask for his old optics back. These did not function in low light as his old ones had.

There, a glint of something other than red and white. He craned to see—just in time to spot a mech with a mop and bucket vanish around the corner. His plating had been dull gray.

No one else seemed to take notice of him.

Maintenance. Of course. Someone had to do the work to keep it this spotless.

Anger again, fleeting and comforting. He wasn't sure why.

“Stop dawdling,” snapped one of his jailers—guards—escort—Primus! He couldn't remember what to think of them as, and it confused him badly. “Come along, we're already almost late.”

He bobbed his helm in assent and followed meekly enough, wondering what else he might see if only he could be free of them.

Chapter 4

There was a very brief orientation. Datapads were shoved into his hands by a harried clerk, a map, a schedule of courses, the curriculum, the training expectations, behavior expectations.

He looked at the schedule as his escort dragged him out. He had a class in less than fifteen minutes. The location was an unintelligible acronym. “Where is HBC 326?”

“That’s your problem,” said the leader of the escort. “We got you here, we got you oriented, we’re done.”

And they left.

He wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or concerned. He’d have to find the building himself, of course, but not having his every move watched was worth it. He shuffled through the datapads, found the one with the map on it, and tried to locate HBC. Whatever that was.

It took longer than it should have. It took ten minutes to walk there, only to discover that HBC wasn’t one building, but two, separated by several other buildings, and that 326 was not in fact in the half of HBC he’d just arrived at.

By the time he found the actual classroom, he was late, venting hard, and even more anxious. The fact the door banged behind him didn’t help at all. The fact that the hundred mecha in the room all turned to look at him helped even less.

He stammered an apology and found somewhere to sit.

It was the third lecture of the term, he realized partway through, and he had no idea of anything that was said. He wrote it down dutifully, distressed at the thought of how behind he was, finished the class and went to the next one and the next.

After the first four hours, one thing was apparent.

He was hopelessly behind.

He couldn’t tell them this. There were so many people like him who needed this, even more than he did. He couldn’t let them down. He didn’t want to tell Trepan he’d failed—the thought made a cold knot settle in his tanks. Trepan, whatever he wanted with him, wasn’t a friend.

There was even an exam in one of the classes. He stared miserably at it, not knowing what to do with it, knowing full well that they wouldn’t make an exception. He wanted to put something at least down, but his terror of making a mistake froze him in place, helpless. In the end, he turned it in blank, to the frown of the instructor.

His fellow students simply didn’t talk to him. They watched him, suspicious and distant. Once, he thought he saw one of them laugh at him.

He sat alone that night over his energon. After a time, he simply collected it to drink in his rooms, and study.

Studying simply made him more bewildered. He didn’t understand the terminology. Someone had neglected to download the full vocabulary file he needed for that. He didn’t understand half of this, and the writing was terrible, and dense, and he kept almost falling into recharge over it. After a

time he got a pad and a stylus and started rewriting everything. It helped a little. He supposed.

He curled up on his recharge slab that night, feeling like he'd accomplished nothing. He wondered where Terminus was, wondered if he dared to ask. *Who* he'd ask, if he could. Trepan certainly wasn't in evidence.

He let out a long vent. Squeezed his optics shut. Longed for the mines with an intensity that drew a half-formed sob from his vocalizer before he stifled it. Forced himself to lie still on the too-big slab, taut with misery and despair, until at last his frame's autonomic systems overrode his emotional cortex and slipped him into recharge.

The prosthetics hurt.

Of course they wouldn't give him real legs. Terminus gritted his dentae and limped onward. The prosthetics were only because they needed him mobile, able to spy, but they were not going to forget his active sedition, and so he was stuck with these. They pinched and scraped, and he was sure they weren't right for a frame of his size.

The medics, of course, did not listen. They were paid to not listen. Paid to not respond to his queries about whether his frame would ever accept new legs, if his self-repair had decided his damage was what his frame ought to be. Little matter, he thought grimly, as if they'd ever let him have true legs again.

He wondered how Megatron fared. If he was so trapped, what of Megatron? He still didn't know the extent of the shadowplay, or if Megatron would even recognize him. He at least still had most of his mind; Trepan's punishment wouldn't be complete without it. But Megatron was in all likelihood helpless. Trusting. Even without shadowplay, Megatron had always been too trusting.

He saw him sometimes, in his classes, frowning intently, trailing datapads, asleep in the library, trying to make up with studying what most mecha were onlined with. The first time, he'd slipped away and come back with a thermal insulator, tucked it tight about the younger mech's shoulders, and left him that way. After the third time, he simply started keeping an extra thermal insulation in the cabinets near the library. Megatron slept in the library more often than not.

Watching him, watching the scores in the tests posted in the hallway, Terminus tasted defeat. Whether it be Trepan's intention, or Megatron's own processor, Megatron was failing. Megatron was failing, and they'd both be out on the streets—or worse—very soon. Trepan must be delighted.

At least Megatron's work might outlive them both.

It was something to hold onto, through the miserable drudgery that was a hospital sanitation worker's life. His colleagues were largely quiet, preferring to get quietly, determinedly drunk when they were offshift, to recharge heavily. He had never seen even miners so dispirited, but under the watchful optics of their superiors, there was little leeway. They didn't even frag in storage closets. It was a miserable function, and yet they counted themselves lucky not to be miners, worked in the dull fear of being downgraded to miners, a sullen pride that they were at least better than someone.

He was not, to say the least, particularly popular among them.

"You smell like slag," one informed him the first evening, to muffled snickers. He said nothing,

limped over to get his ration, and sat heavily on his berth.

“You smell like slag,” and its endless, creative variations became a common greeting, a standard part of his life. Terminus accepted it, and worked. He was not afraid of what they might do to him. Death, further shadowplay—anything that would end his awareness of this would be welcome. But what they might yet do to Megatron, that chilled him to the spark.

Worse still, he knew that was what they expected him to think.

So he kept his helm down, and worked.

Chapter 5

“Hi.”

Megatron looked down in the act of collecting his midday ration of energon. A small, visored faceplate looked up at him, despite the lack of eyes or a mouth managing to convey a nervous, eager to please air. One of his fellow first-years.

“Hello,” he said, looking the smaller mech over. Very small indeed, not quite a minibot but bordering on it, with a very simple red and white paintjob. He wasn’t sure what the alt-mode was, which doubtless would have driven his instructors to distraction, but the overall effect was pleasing and friendly. Perfect for a medic, he thought somewhat sadly. Not intimidating. The instructors had happily singled him out as an example of the heavy, intimidating aspect miners and the ‘labor classes’ were supposed to exemplify.

“I’m First Aid,” said the smaller mech. “What’s your designation?”

“Megatron.”

“Oh!” The smaller mech looked as if he wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. “Um. Is anyone, um, sitting with you?”

“No.”

First Aid filled his cube and followed him. “Oh, good. Hey, so um, you’re new too?”

Megatron looked at him with raised optic ridges. “Yes.”

“So, you’re catching up as well. I was kind of late in maturing? Something about the sentio metallico settling, they didn’t tell me much, but so I’m late joining my cohort, and I noticed you are too, and I was wondering, would you want to study together? Because I’m pretty lost.” The glow behind the visor narrowed a little into something that was likely the equivalent of a sheepish grin.

Megatron hesitated, wondering if he could trust the smaller mech.

First Aid looked down. “Though...if you don’t want dead weight...it’s okay, I guess? Sorry, I didn’t want to presume too much...”

That made up his mind. He managed a smile. “No. Nothing of the sort. I was just surprised that anyone would want to study with me.”

“Well, I would.”

“If so, I would be delighted,” said Megatron. He settled down, making room for First Aid next to him. “Do you know what your specialty will be yet?”

“No,” said First Aid, looking glumly down at his ration of energon. “Everyone else in our cohort has. Primus, what if they make us have to repeat training? That would be horrible.”

Megatron rather suspected he’d be lucky to be allowed to repeat the training, but nodded anyway.

“Do you know yet?”

Megatron chuckled. “No. Far from it. I will be very surprised if I do not have to repeat training.”

“But you’re good! You know all the things in the lectures! I know your scores aren’t the best but really, they’re hard tests! But you can answer the questions in class, which no one else does!”

“You do test well,” said Megatron, “which I don’t.” He raised his optic ridges at the smaller mech. “What makes you think I’m so much better at this than you are?”

“I—I um...I...”

“Excuse me,” said a voice above them, and both of them looked up. One of the other students in their cohort looked back at them, wings hiked high on his back, blue optics narrowed. “First Aid, there is an open spot for you at the usual table.”

“You can have it.” There was an edge to First Aid’s voice. “I’m sitting here.”

The flightframe’s optics flicked from one to the other. “Are you sure of this?”

“Yes.” A change in First Aid’s tone, something challenging. Megatron didn’t understand it, why this medic would be suddenly so hostile. “Would you care to join us?”

“No,” said the flightframe, and turned away. First Aid watched him go, the band of light behind his visor narrow with suspicion.

“I take it you two don’t get on,” said Megatron, carefully.

“Pompous gasket,” muttered First Aid. “Ignore him. Ignore *all* of them.”

“Why should I do that?”

“You haven’t heard what they call you?”

He had. It stung, but he certainly wasn’t going to worry about it over everything else. At least they weren’t predisposed to violence. He inclined his helm in a nod.

“Yeah. Ignore it. You’re working harder than any of us; that’s *important*.” First Aid let out a long vent. “So, I started thinking, if that’s what they’re saying about *you*, what are they saying about me? You actually know things. Me, I’m just...overcooked.”

“Protoform formation happens at different rates,” said Megatron, who’d been reading the pediatrics textbooks the previous night. “It’s perfectly normal.”

“Not when it makes for an easy jibe,” said First Aid.

Megatron chuckled. “Very true.”

First Aid joined him in the library that evening. He had a good copy of the vocabulary upload and was more than happy to share. He also was simply good company.

I can do this, Megatron found himself thinking after one late-night study session, as he left with his notes in hand, First Aid’s cheerful farewell ringing in his audials. He smiled; the little mech’s good cheer was infectious. *I can actually do this. I’ve pulled my scores up by ten points in the last week. I can do more.*

First Aid's scores were also improving, Megatron was pleased to note, which meant it was somehow reciprocal. And he now had someone to share fuel with, and, on one of their rare days off, explore the city with.

The city itself was huge and glittering, but Megatron's optic kept getting caught on the unsavory parts; the rusting mech curled in an alley, an empty energon cube in front of him for passerby's charity, the battered and weary sanitation worker being harangued away from a transport by an enforcer, the mecha being turned away from an oilhouse because they were not the right caste. He didn't like it; it made him feel small and dirty and impotent, and below it lay a shameful relief that he was now exempt from those things.

"More people should do what Ratchet does," said First Aid unexpectedly one day, as they passed a mouth of an alley with a Syk addict juddering mindlessly in its depths. "He has a clinic in the Dead End, totally free. Only one of the faculty who does. No one's been apprenticed to him for *years*. No one wants to. I'm not even sure if it's legal? But I think it's important. We're lucky; why are we ignoring everyone else?"

Megatron looked down at him in surprise. "I agree," he said. "I would like to be apprenticed to him."

"Me too," said First Aid, and the light behind his visor curved in a smile. "That would be fun, with you. Ratchet...well, the fourth years call him 'The Hatchet' for a reason. But it'd be worthwhile. And I want to do something that matters. And if I have a friend with me..."

Megatron smiled. "Yes," he said. "I understand."

Orion stared at the blank screen of the datapad and felt a proper fool.

He'd *known* someone writing as Megatron of Tarn did wouldn't keep doing so for long. He'd *known* it, and still, now, he felt...sad. Betrayed. Angry. Nothing new for months.

He sighed. Megatron hadn't been advocating violence, but he had nevertheless angered someone, that much was apparent. And there was so much he had yet to write, too—Orion had already thought about what Megatron had said on the subject of functional lock-in, about structural violence, and wondered whether the author might go in the same direction as his thoughts had.

Unlikely. Unlikely that he would ever write again.

Hopefully, he'd had a broad enough readership that the Council wouldn't go after individuals. Orion used a number of proxies, false leads, all the proper precautions, but he didn't have as much faith in them as he might have liked. Those less fortunate likely had less.

He wondered if Ratchet knew, if Ratchet read them at all. Ratchet certainly *acted* on them, with the clinic. It wasn't as if he'd been able to saunter in and set up a clinic, either. That place had been the result of years of something very like war, with Overlord's pet medics raising strenuous objection to the idea of an outsider (a trained outsider, at that) poaching their clientele—though victims was a better term, given the average level of skill of the practitioners and the average price of the procedures. For many of them, being paid to hurt people was a dream come true. So

Overlord, and his hired bullies, took an understandably dull view of Ratchet's arrival.

Ratchet took a dim view of Overlord.

And Overlord had never encountered someone who reacted to threats as Ratchet had. Mecha were supposed to cower when you threatened to tear their arms off, not give you a sarcastic estimate of the force required, poke you hard in an arm cable, and then turn their backs on you while explaining why you had a suddenly uncooperative arm for the next four hours. They weren't supposed to stare levelly at you as you described all the hideous things they'd do to you, and then give you an account of the last oil filter they'd changed, which was a thousand times worse. They weren't supposed to, so easily it appeared accidental, rally the rest of the community around them. Mecha *liked* free medical care. Especially high quality medical care. And Ratchet used pain chips, unless someone had been *really* stupid and the injury was minor.

It had been about then that Orion had stepped in and made it very clear that anyone messing with Ratchet would be messing with him as well, and Overlord backed off. As much as Overlord ever backed off—he was probably still planning things.

Orion wondered what Megatron might have said about that circumstance, about the inherent violence of a system that supported mecha like Overlord, about how to deal with them. They certainly weren't on top, but they exploited the lower castes just as much—if not more—than the Functionists did.

He looked at the blank datapad.

He lifted a stylus, and frowned at it.

Then he opened the text editor, and began to write.

Not yet addressed are the issues that an authoritarian regime creates within poorer urban areas, the gangs, the black markets, the overall resistance on the part of the established criminal structure to legitimate aid. He paused, frowned at the stylus. Went back to writing. On occasion, the established criminal structure is so deeply entrenched, it is a government in its own right. It levies taxes, has its own legal code, its own defensive capabilities—and if it is a functional structure, many will support it wholeheartedly, as in that regard it is an improvement on the established structure. Yet these violently guarded kingdoms within our society are often ignored, while nonviolent dissidents reap the full ire of the law...

He wasn't sure if he was right. He did think that it needed to be said, that it was true to his own experiences. Maybe that would be enough.

Chapter 6

First Aid was smiling, he could tell. Megatron smiled back. “Looks like we’ve both made it into the surgery program,” he said.

“Thanks to *you*,” said First Aid.

“No. Thanks to you.” They looked at the scores and their assignment with great satisfaction. “But it looks like we’re assigned different instructors for our practical classes.”

“Yeah.” First Aid looked downcast. “I wish we could trade. I don’t know who your instructor is, but he’s got to be gentler than Pharma.”

Megatron put a hand on First Aid’s shoulder. “Pharma’s the best,” he said quietly. “And you deserve it. You *are* good enough, Aid. No matter what the rest of our cohort says.”

“You’re just being nice.” But he looked pleased enough, especially at the use of his nickname, an unusual intimacy from Megatron, who was still unaccustomed to treating his colleagues with anything but formality.

Megatron smiled again. “Not being truthful about this would be being unkind,” he said. “You deserve it. Now, get yourself to class, pay attention, and I’ll see you this evening. We can compare notes.”

“Yes. Yes, right.” First Aid’s visor lit up. “I’ll have something to look forward to, then!”

Megatron watched him go with warm affection blooming in his spark. He wasn’t entirely sure if it was friendship or something more, and didn’t entirely care. Either way, having someone like First Aid around made it all bearable—all the little taunts, all the snide remarks, his knowledge that his scores had yet to much improve. With Aid’s ready, friendly companionship, he could manage.

“Hello, sweetspark. Wash *up*.”

Ratchet’s mouth quirked in a smile. He was all over semi-processed energon and Syk; one of his patients had purged his tanks while he’d been examining the mech’s intake. Some of it had been dealt with by the clinic washracks. Most of it hadn’t. “As if I smell any worse than you do after a fuel pump transplant.”

“You do.” Pharma’s wings hiked up in amusement. “Wash up, and come get your fuel. I bought some of those lead flakes you’re particularly fond of on my way home today.”

Both of Ratchet’s optic ridges shot up. Even when Pharma was in a particularly good mood, he didn’t tend to do the shopping. “Is there something I should know? Have I been diagnosed with something nasty and fatal?”

“Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. Wash up and I’ll tell you.”

Ratchet went to wash up, taking his time. He was tired; it had been a long and messy day, and the

hot spray of water and solvents worked knots out of his back and neck cabling. *I'm getting old*, he thought with some amusement. *If I caught anyone else my age running that damned clinic, I'd think they were insane...right after I shook them by the hand!*

He thought about the patients who pulled knives or worse on him, the would-be burglars who wanted the medications to sell on the streets, the endless stream of 'accidents' Overlord had arranged. He certainly couldn't blame Pharma for resenting the clinic, for trying to get him to close it down. He would have had fits if his mate were doing what he was—even without factoring in that Pharma had not the slightest clue of how to function outside a hospital. But some things were more important than his safety. Like all the lives taken by perfectly preventable illness. Like people seeing that there was an alternative to Overlord's little games. Like the guttermecha who'd somehow fallen between the cracks, or been so injured that society refused to give them work.

And it was in no small part for himself, because some days when he returned home to his bright little housing unit and a caring if bad-tempered mate, the guilt choked him so that he stood on the doorstep and could not move forward. How could he live like this when other mecha starved for want of energon? How could lead flakes on a cube of foamed high grade taste good, with the memory of the optics of a starving newbuild, declared useless as soon as he'd first transformed? Sometimes the Iacon Medical Center itself revolted him, with its sculptures and aggrandizement of their art, while mecha slowly rotted from rust infections on the same world. Three days ago, he'd tried to treat a mech with a rust infection of his dentae. Tried; the infection was deep-rooted, and reached the brain casing and then the brain, the bot in question fully conscious of its progress until then, fully conscious of the hot sear of agony as it wrapped around his brain, then reduced him to a gibbering wreck. There had been nothing to do at that point. Just pain chips, supportive care, making sure he died clean.

Ratchet wasn't religious. If he were, he suspected that everyone but those mecha was going to the Pit, for being complicit in such vicious degradation. For all he did to ease suffering, he was just as guilty. He envied Pharma, sometimes, for not looking at the energon they drank, the supplements they used, and wondering about how they were produced. The conditions of the miners, the conditions of the refinery, the empty tanks that needed it more than theirs. Pharma had never known a day of underfueling in his function, and Ratchet hoped it would stay that way, whatever the attendant injustices. What underfueling Ratchet had known had been entirely of his own choice. There was a very great difference in that.

He finished cleaning off, then polished his armor to a high gloss. Pharma might be irritated that he was letting his energon sit, but Ratchet had had enough of feeling grungy for the day.

Pharma was not irritated. Pharma was still in a good mood, and the energon was good as well. Was he feeling guilty for the argument they'd had two days ago? Ratchet wasn't sure.

"I have a new student," Pharma announced. "I think this one is going to be worthwhile—he's annoyingly deferent but we can work past that."

"All the students are annoyingly deferent around you," said Ratchet. "But if you think he's good enough, then he's going to be spectacular." He smiled over his cube. "Is that what all this is about?"

"Can't I just be happy to see my esteemed bondmate?"

Ratchet snorted, secretly charmed. Both he and Pharma were irascible enough that brief periods without an argument—serious or for fun—were rare indeed. Pharma might be significantly younger than he, but they'd both been sparked with the same sharp glossa, and finding Pharma had been a fragging relief. He'd never thought he'd find anyone willing to put up with his bad hours

and worse temper. He loved Pharma, loved arguing theory with him, as long as the argument remained academic, for fun instead of in anger. “And I’m happy to see you, too, my dear.”

The endearment felt odd, always did from him, as did his compliments of anything physical, but Pharma’s wings hiked up a little and he knew he’d said the right thing.

“And it’s rare enough to find a good student,” said Pharma. “Poor old Lathe got saddled with one frag of a pity case. Did you know, someone decided to reprogram a miner and send him here to see if miners can be *trained* to be medics?”

Pharma didn’t like Lathe. No wonder he felt like celebrating. He’d picked the plum of the incoming class to mentor, and Lathe had gotten stuck with the worst. Ratchet personally thought Lathe made a great drinking buddy, if a deeply boring surgeon with only basic skill. Pharma simply held him in disdain for his stupidity and didn’t care about anything else.

“How much reformatting did they inflict on the poor fragger?” he asked, instead of following that unsavory line of thought.

“Paint job, some new equipment, and going from his scores, nothing more.”

Ratchet let out a low hiss from his vents. “Sounds like someone wants him to fail.”

“As if they’d have to try! Come on, Ratchet. A miner? Doing *our* line of work? If they’d scanned much of a processor in him when he was onlined, he would have been here in the first place.”

Ratchet made a noncommittal noise. The evening had started well; he didn’t want to be the one to put a foot wrong first.

“In any case, Lathe isn’t going to have any luck with that one. It’ll be fun watching him try, though.”

“He certainly will try,” said Ratchet softly, and ignored Pharma’s puzzled look as he took another mouthful of energon. Lathe sure as Pit tried, you had to say that for him. “Can we stop talking about this? I’ve had three separate mecha purge on me this afternoon. I’m exhausted.”

Pharma huffed. “Fine.”

“I’d like to hear more about this student of yours,” he said, to soothe Pharma. “Anyone who can impress you has my attention.”

It worked. Pharma smiled, and started talking. Ratchet relaxed back into his chair and listened.

Chapter 7

First Aid stayed over that evening, rather inadvertently. It was mostly because he'd fallen into recharge over Megatron's desk, and Megatron hadn't had the spark to move him before nodding off over his own work in the window.

So it was with considerable surprise that he came back online to see First Aid bending over him, visor bright with worry.

"Hey," he said quietly. "You all right?"

Megatron blinked at him. "Yes?" he hazarded, because, while he felt fine, First Aid had to be concerned for a reason. His face felt damp, and when he reached up to wipe at it, his hand came away sticky with optic cleanser.

"You were having a bad recharge flux," said First Aid. "Talking and all."

Megatron tried a small smile. "Sorry I disturbed you."

First Aid glanced away, then back at him. "Who's Trepan?"

A chill settled in Megatron's spark, totally irrational. Trepan had helped him. Why should he be so frightened? He wasn't sure what to say, settled on, "He picked me. For this. He's supervising my integration into the medical caste."

"Oh." First Aid looked away again, visor flickering with indecision and discomfort.

"How do you know his name?"

First Aid muttered something. Megatron looked at him quizzically until he repeated it.

"You were begging him to stop."

The cold in his spark increased a thousandfold. "I don't understand," he said. "He's never been anything but kind to me..."

"You're scared of him," said First Aid flatly. "Someone who's kind to you but still scares you like that isn't really being kind, Megatron."

"It was a dream." His voice sounded strange to his audials. More firm than he felt. "A foolish recharge flux. I'm worried about the exam."

"Yeah, right," said First Aid. "Want me to stay?"

He hesitated. He didn't want to prove First Aid any more right. But being alone just now wasn't something he could face with anything like equanimity.

"Please," he said, and First Aid patted his shoulder.

"I'll take the floor."

First Aid was disturbed. Megatron—well, he knew there was a story there, to be sure, but he hadn't really considered the possibility of it being a very bad story. But as upset as Megatron was, as embarrassed as he seemed at what he called a stupid recharge flux, First Aid simply couldn't believe that it was the furthest thing from stupid, or fantasy. Something bad had happened to his friend. Something so bad, he either didn't remember it, or couldn't talk about it. And Trepan was at the center of it.

He didn't dare tell Megatron about the way he'd sobbed, as if his spark were being wrung in two. About the real terror in his voice. Megatron was unhappy enough, and First Aid very much feared that if he knew someone had seen him like that, he'd never be able to look First Aid in the optics again. He seemed intensely private.

Intensely private? Or was that, too, a product of something that had been done to him? Was all of his reserve learned rather than intrinsic? The bare overview of psychology they'd had said mecha could respond to trauma like that. The thought made him angry. Megatron was a decent mech. He tried harder than anyone else in their class, he didn't deserve this. Whatever Trepan might have done.

Trepan was at the center of it, and as Megatron had just admitted, Trepan had considerable power over him. There were so many very, very bad things that could mean.

He needed to find out who this Trepan was first. And he knew just the way to do it. Anyone high ranked enough to supervise the sort of project Megatron represented had to be some kind of medical specialist in their own right, and probably a graduate of this same institution. First Aid went directly to the alumni records and got to work.

Trepan. There was only one. A mnemosurgeon.

"Oh frag," First Aid said softly.

He felt an absolute fool. When he met First Aid during their midday break, he knew for a certain fact that, whatever he'd said in the midst of that recharge flux, it had done considerable damage. First Aid wouldn't look at him straight on. Not until the end of the break.

"Megatron," he said, "We have to talk."

"Is this about the dream?" he asked.

"Yes," said First Aid. "It is. But we have to talk about it in private, no eavesdroppers, okay?"

"My rooms?"

"No. Oh frag no. No. Not your rooms. The utility closet. On the third floor? That should work."

"If you insist." It was odd, but hadn't First Aid put up with his own panic that evening? Megatron could certainly humor him.

"Good. After classes. We'll meet then." First Aid's hand darted out to take his, squeeze briefly. "I

promise, you'll understand, okay?"

He smiled at First Aid. "I trust you."

It startled him that he meant it.

He'd get to the storage closet ahead of time, check it for monitoring devices. He wasn't sure what they looked like, but he'd look them up. There was something seriously bad going on with Megatron under Trepan's orders. Really, really bad. And if Megatron didn't remember it, that meant Trepan had erased it, and that made it even worse by a hundred times, because what was so bad that someone like that would *erase* it.

He wasn't totally sure he should tell Megatron about it. What if Megatron would be happier not knowing that something that bad had happened to him? But Trepan was still in a position of power over him. Megatron had to get out, and in order to get out, Megatron had to know. And Megatron had a right to know. Didn't he?

First Aid squared his shoulders. Whatever it was, he was going to help Megatron escape, whatever it took. Megatron treated him well, wasn't condescending, didn't make snide comments. He was one frag of a lot better than the rest of their cohort, that was for sure, and he was a friend. His only friend, if he was to be entirely honest with himself, and he deserved better. Whatever this turned up, they'd face it together.

He set off toward his next class at a determined trot.

And almost ran right into the enforcers outside the door.

A heavy servo settled on his shoulder. "Your designation is First Aid?"

"Yes?" he squeaked.

"We'll need you to come with us."

Chapter 8

“Why have you not contacted him?”

It wasn't Trepan, at least, but the mech staring at him was likely just as dangerous. Terminus looked down, bowed his helm, tried his best to seem submissive.

“Your schedule matches his,” the mech said. “We've assigned you to the same parts of the building. Yet you have made no move to contact him. He has not noticed you. With our arrangements, that does not just happen. Not without someone else interfering.” He leaned over the desk, allowing Terminus a good view of his weaponry, shoulder-mounted cannon, reinforced fists. “Trepan told us that you'd seen the light, Terminus. Trepan told us you wouldn't be any more trouble at all, and that if he thought you were, he'd come back and strip you of everything that differentiates you from a drone. Do you like that idea, Terminus? Does it appeal? You're certainly on the right track if it does.”

Terminus hunched himself smaller. “Please, sir...” he started, desperately placating. But the goon sitting across the table from him wasn't done.

“Maybe that would be too much trouble,” he said, the corners of his mouth turning up. Terminus tried not to look him in the optics, let the mech see his simmering disdain. He was a bully, a minor bully—but a bully with Terminus's life in his hands nevertheless. “Maybe we should just put you in the smelter they should have thrown you in the instant you were dug out of that rockslide. You have no place here, not not if you can't perform your function.”

“I just need more time,” Terminus whispered, the rage roaring up in his spark. His fists clenched, trembling. Hopefully the mech would take the quiver in his voice as fear. “Please, just more time, he's busy, and my supervisor, and if they see us talking it will raise suspicions...”

“Excuses,” said the fragger, and stood, towering over him. “No more excuses for you, Terminus. You will make contact with him. You will start following him. Or you'll get the smelter—and unless you come up with a *really* good excuse, I'm unlikely to go to the trouble of offlining you first.”

“Yes sir,” he said. “I'll do better, sir, I promise you that. I won't let you down again, sir.”

Another slow smile. “I'll hold you to that. Though feel free to fail—I at least will take great pleasure in it.”

He meant it. And Terminus didn't know if Trepan would care enough to stop him. Likely not.

He limped from the room, wishing he had privacy in which to vent his rage. But it would not be possible; he had no wish to test how closely they were watching him, and his anger seethed all the worse for his control. He'd thought he'd known what it was to hate when they first had denied him repairs, sentenced him to starve to death, but now, *now*—oh, this was entirely different. This was a rage that could destroy worlds, he hoped *would* destroy worlds, *wished* it might, and he was not sure whether it was for his sake or Megatron's.

He composed himself as best he could. He had to wait. He had to play along, because all he could do for that revenge now was live. So much for holding them off by not talking to Megatron. Now what?

He let out a long vent. Hopefully, Megatron wouldn't tell him anything too damning. Hopefully

that little medic friend of his was his confidant. He stamped back the bitter pang of envy and the vicious longing to take that little medic's place. For Megatron's sake, it was better he didn't.

He straightened his shoulders. He'd do what he could to stave off Trepan. It wouldn't be much, but he'd do it. And Megatron need a friend, an *alive* friend, because if Trepan succeeded, Megatron wouldn't last a day in the gutter. But Terminus had been through far, far worse. Megatron would need him then. Getting himself smelted would do no good at all.

It didn't feel good. It didn't feel right. But it was the only thing he could do.

First Aid reset his optical band several times. The room was dark, and the pressure of the mecha behind him made his plating flare in nervous instinct. This wasn't good. This *really* wasn't good. Oh frag. He felt silly for wondering it, but if Megatron really was the victim of a mnemosurgeon, did this mean that whoever it was now knew about him? About his searches?

He'd thought in the back of his processor that he might have been being paranoid, that neither he nor Megatron could be so important that someone would really be *monitoring* them. The storage closet had been him being clever. These things did not happen in real life, to real people, they just *didn't*. Maybe he'd failed a test, was on academic probation, something totally unconnected, mundane. That had to be it.

A mech reset his vocalizer, and a light flicked on. There was a table. Chairs. And on the other side of the table, Trepan. First Aid recognized him from his file.

Trepan smiled, yellow optics amused, and gestured with a hand. First Aid focused on his fingers—not a sign of the needles that tipped them. "Please, sit."

He didn't want to. But the mecha behind him pushed him forward, into the chair.

"Now, First Aid, we recognize your concern," said Trepan. "It's a useful trait in a medic. Just what we want to see. But your *application* of it is inappropriate."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," he said.

Trepan tilted his head. "About Megatron."

"Megatron is a future colleague." He sounded bolder than he felt. "Why shouldn't I associate with him, or be concerned for his wellbeing?"

"Megatron will not be 'a future colleague'," said Trepan, firmly. "You will do well to stay away from him, for the sake of your career. I know you have no desire to repeat your training."

"Excuse me?" His voice went shrill at the end of the question. "Excuse me? Are you threatening me to stay away from my *friend*? Frag off. I'm not scared of you, and I'm not betraying him to you, so go—go sit on a *mining drill* and fragging *rotate*."

Trepan sighed. "Are you sure?"

"Slagged right I'm sure. Leave him alone. You've already fragged with him enough. I've heard him screaming." He glared at Trepan. "And if you want to hurt him again, you'll have to go

through me.”

“Interesting,” said Trepan and rose. First Aid tensed. “He does rather inspire people, doesn’t he. How unfortunate. For you and for him.” He nodded at the mecha behind First Aid.

First Aid tried to rise. Tried to run. But hands on his shoulders and arms slammed him back down into his seat. One bent his helm forward, exposing the back of his neck, and his visor flared in panic as he remembered the diagrams in the textbooks about mnemosurgery.

“Don’t worry,” said Trepan from his side, from behind him, oh frag oh frag they were going to shadowplay him! His tank clenched in panic and he tried to thrash away from his captors, but they were too strong, fingers denting his shoulders, too big, and he did not move, could not escape, oh frag, was this how Megatron had felt, was this why Megatron had nightmares? “Minimal alterations are authorized for you. Just a tweak of your loyalties, nothing more. Now, don’t resist. Resisting tends to make people leak. We don’t want that happening to one of Cybertron’s up and coming medical minds, now do we?”

A quiet *snick* of needles. First Aid whimpered.

“Shh now. Don’t fight me. It’ll be over before you know it,” Trepan said, in his audial, and the needles stung as they slid in.

Ratchet stretched, rocking up onto the tips of his pedes and hearing the articulations of his back pop back into their optimal configuration. He’d had a good morning in the lab, and now had an hour or so before his next timepoint.

Which was good, because Shockwave had just commed him to say he was in the area, and would Ratchet care to join him for a cube?

Ratchet had agreed. Shockwave did tend to get up to devious things, but since one of those devious things was funding Ratchet’s clinic, he tended to more or less agree with them.

When he arrived, the cafe was crowded, which meant lots of noise. Ratchet raised an optic ridge. Shockwave didn’t much like crowds, which meant that today, he had something on his processor. Ratchet smiled. Things had been boring enough recently that this could well be a welcome respite. He made his way over to Shockwave, who had a table in the middle back of the restaurant.

“Shockwave, good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, old friend. How’s Pharma?”

“His usual self,” said Ratchet. He settled into his seat. “Gloating over a new student of his. How’re you?”

“The usual,” said Shockwave. “A conniving crankcase.”

“You don’t say. Midgrade, please, lead shavings.”

“The same for me. How is the academy? Teaching anything? Spoken to old Lathe recently?”

“The usual, no, and no.” The energon arrived. The servers here knew the hierarchy of the academy as well as the academy’s members did. “What are you up to?”

“I have a project you might help me on.”

Primus, it had to be important. He'd copped to it too fast. Ratchet gave Shockwave a very stern look over his cube of energon. “Oh? And what is that?”

Shockwave grinned. “Well, how would you like to give poor old Lathe a bit of a break? He's been putting off all this time off he's earned, and his conjunx is getting rather vexed about it. Only problem is, he's got a student.”

“Oh?” said Ratchet.

“Half a term of teaching his student,” said Shockwave. “No paperwork, I'll make sure that's taken care of. If you think the mech's a total failure, so be it.”

“One of your outliers?”

“No. Quite the opposite. I just owe Lathe a favor.”

“You're up to something.”

Shockwave smiled charmingly. “Of course. Will you do it?”

Ratchet snorted. “Out of curiosity, I suppose. Half a term, Shockwave, no more.”

“That's all I can ask.”

Chapter 9

“First Aid!” Megatron lengthened his stride and caught up with the smaller bot easily. “Did Pharma keep you after? I was concerned—”

He broke off as First Aid turned to look at him, visor dim.

“Aid, are you all right?”

First Aid looked away, muttered something.

That wasn’t like him. He was now really worried, reached for his friend’s shoulder.

First Aid *flinched*.

Megatron drew back just as quickly. “I’m sorry. I... Aid, did something happen?”

First Aid stopped, still not looking at him.

Megatron stopped as well, keeping his distance from the other mech. Dread settled in his tank. He thought it was ridiculous, First Aid was a friend, but the dread didn’t abate. Something was profoundly wrong.

“I need you to leave me alone,” said First Aid, low and clear.

“I don’t understand.” Confusion. Confusion masked the pain, confusion and disbelief. First Aid wouldn’t. He’d withstood the taunts of the rest of their cohort to be kind. First Aid offered comfort, no mockery, when he’d woken them both up screaming in a foolish nightmare. First Aid wouldn’t just...do this.

“I need you to leave me alone,” repeated First Aid.

He had no words. He stared at First Aid, stunned.

“I know what you did,” said First Aid, low and fast, and angry. Megatron knew what he sounded like angry, he’d heard it directed against others on his behalf too many times, and the shock of it turned on him cut as deep as any new scalpel. “I know what you did, you... you...” He looked at Megatron now, visor blazing, as lost for words as Megatron himself.

“This is yours,” he said after several vents, and flung a datapad at Megatron’s feet. Then he turned and ran, as if he feared Megatron would come after him.

Megatron didn’t know what he’d done. He stood there, then very slowly leaned down to lift the datapad, now cracked. He brushed it off as best he could, not that that would make a difference. Looked down at himself in it, the strange optics and paint job, and tried to remember himself as he had been. Try as he might, he couldn’t recall anything he’d done that might elicit that response, and the thought frightened him.

After a time, he turned and went slowly to his next class.

The pain didn’t reach him until that evening, as he sat in his window, trying to memorize the components of the filtering system. The memory of First Aid’s face came abruptly back to him, the blaze of his visor, the rage in his voice, and it struck like a punch in the vents. He put aside his notes for fear of breaking them and clenched his hands on his knees, helm bowed.

What had he done? He didn't know, didn't know why First Aid was so concerned about him one moment, and so angry the next. He *trusted* Aid. He'd thought they were friends. How could it have been brought down so easily?

What had he done?

He knew Aid. He knew Aid tended toward the forgiving. So whatever he had done, whatever Aid *thought* he had done, had been terrible. With his own memories, with his own gaps in knowledge, Megatron wasn't sure he could trust himself over First Aid's understanding of the situation.

He looked out over the city, and abruptly hated it.

He didn't belong here.

He didn't belong here and it was laughing at him, everything seemed to be laughing at him. He was some sort of joke, a miner pretending to be a medic, and they'd trapped him in it. First Aid had been some sort of hope, but since when was he so stupid to believe in that sort of hope, that offered by a mech he barely knew. He was trapped here, where he didn't belong, and the one thing that might have made it bearable had just seen him for what he was—whatever he actually was!—and abandoned him. Typical of this place, of these people!

As quickly as it had come, the hate ebbed away, leaving him diminished and exhausted, his spark aching. He couldn't bear the sight of the city.

For the first time, he drew the blinds over the window, and burrowed himself in under the recharge slab. There, he had a wall at his back and something over his helm, and it felt better. It felt like home.

Lathe poured them both drinks of something very near unrefined ore before Ratchet had even sat down, then pushed the larger of the two cubes toward him. "You're going to want that," he said. "You and your bleeding spark."

Both of Ratchet's optic ridges went up. "Since when do I have a bleeding spark?" he said. "We all know I'm an utter crankshaft who can't be bothered to grant anyone or anything the barest veneer of civility."

"You and that clinic," said Lathe. "That's enough proof for me." He looked up from under his helm at Ratchet. "There's talk and there's doing, and as you're the sort who is more fond of doing, this'll torque you off. You'll want the drink."

"I'm not exactly objecting," Ratchet pointed out, and took a swallow. His optics watered. "Frag. Did you clean this out of someone's corpse, Lathe? I think slag would be a compliment."

Lathe snickered. "Foul, isn't it."

"Yes," said Ratchet, and had another drink. "So. What's this about this student of yours?"

Lathe sighed. "Yeah. Him. You know I don't like saying something's hopeless."

"Yes."

“He’s hopeless.”

“Is he.”

“Never seen anything like it before. Oh, sure, he tries. I admire a mech who’ll try. It’s not doing him a lot of good. You can do something with him ten times, twelve times, fifty times, and he’ll still forget it on the fifty-first try. He can’t remember the vocabulary. He can’t write worth slag. He acts like he expects someone to throw him into a smelter if he looks at you wrong. I’ve seen the sanitary crews retain lessons better than him. No, Ratchet, he is *hopeless* and I quite frankly don’t understand why.”

“And you’ve ruled out common processor skips.”

“Even if I *did* believe in that, this happens far too often and far too much.”

“Hm.”

“Primus’s cogs, Ratchet, if you take him off my hands, I’ll owe you drinks for the rest of our functions. I know I’m not the most brilliant mechanism in my generation,” his mouth twisted wryly, “unlike some, but I sure as Pit don’t need another complete failure added to my record. Poor mech. He’s a fragging joke and he knows it. They should have just let him stay in the mines where he’d be able to keep some of his dignity.”

“Are you serious about those drinks?”

“No.” Lathe sighed. “Look, I’m giving you fair warning not to expect anything much. But if you take him, he might stand something of a chance. He needs someone patient *and* brilliant.”

Ratchet choked on his fuel. “Patient?”

Lathe gave him a look. “Well, the other brilliant mech in our department isn’t exactly known for his tolerance of incompetence. How is Pharma, anyway?”

“Very well,” said Ratchet. “Positively thriving on this little rivalry the two of you have going. You do realize we’re not in medical school anymore, don’t you?”

“Tell that to *him*.”

Privately, Ratchet was more than aware that Pharma was probably the one keeping their little feud going, but he still would have quite cheerfully strangled Lathe anyway. “I’ll look into a transfer,” he said. “What’s his name?”

“Typical miner name. Megatron. Tarnian corruption of ‘Megaton’, I think, you know how they love to stick r’s where they don’t belong. He’s easy enough to spot. Look for the big lout trying to fade into the background and failing miserably.”

“I shall,” said Ratchet. He wondered how much of the poor mech’s problem was Lathe, then dismissed it as being probably too optimistic, drained the cube. “Thank you for the information, Lathe.”

“No,” said Lathe. “Thank *you*.”

His sincerity troubled Ratchet more than perhaps anything else about the conversation.

Chapter 10

“And how are things going?” Trepan smiled, condescending, across the table.

Megatron wanted to bristle. He felt like he would have bristled, long ago, wasn’t sure why he believed it so strongly.

But not now. Not in front of Trepan. Doing anything to anger Trepan was suicide, he knew it. He bowed his helm instead and said, “There is...some difficulty in adjustment. It is...minor, and will pass.”

First Aid was gone. He was failing. He knew that. He knew he wasn’t programmed for this. His processor betrayed him at the oddest of times, stalling on recalling information, or forgetting it entirely. Sometimes things were switched, and these were things he knew with absolute certainty and sometimes they were simply *wrong*. It frightened him. He couldn’t trust his own mind. He couldn’t think about how this could have happened. Every time he tried, it ended in a wall.

So he stopped trying. He did as he was told. He did it as well as he could. But for all that he didn’t think about it, the terror and the *wrongness* pervaded every waking moment. And this mech in front of him, one he could break with a single blow, this mech was the center of it.

He’d never known a fear like it, so completely focused on one being.

He couldn’t think about why it might be.

He stayed very still under Trepan’s gaze. If Trepan knew what was happening, how badly he was doing... He knew, rationally, that what they would do was send him back to the mines. He *knew* that. They’d said it.

But his spark knew otherwise. Being sent back to the mines would be a blessing. They wouldn’t do that.

He didn’t understand. Why they’d do this. Why they hated him. Why they were pretending, so hard, not to hate him. Why they’d brought him here.

He couldn’t complain to Trepan. He couldn’t let him know about all the small cruelties, the jibes, the looks—he was a miner, and his colleagues knew it, and they hated him for it. They felt he brought them down. Made a joke of their Primus-given calling.

“Difficulty adjusting?” Trepan widened his optics in false concern. Megatron didn’t understand why he recognized it as false, but it was. Shouldn’t Trepan be concerned his pet project was failing? But no, his reaction was insincere. Perhaps that was one of the things that frightened Megatron so. “Well. That...is only to be expected. Fortunately for you, I anticipated this.” He touched the comm panel by his elbow. “Send him in.”

Megatron looked back at him with confusion, concern, and he grinned.

“A friend for you, Megatron. Someone to talk to.”

The door slid open and uneven, halting footsteps entered the room. Megatron turned. And stared.

“Terminus?”

Terminus looked back at him and tried to smile. It didn't reach his optics, stiff, contrived. "Hello, Megatron."

He'd thought he'd seen that shape before, hadn't believed it. He stared up at Terminus, spark in his throat. Terminus would have come to see him as soon as he could. If it was safe.

That he hadn't...

Primus. He glanced sidelong at Trepan, then at Terminus, and was rewarded with a brief flare of light in Terminus's optics.

Terminus didn't trust him either.

It was a relief to know who the enemy was. Something of the fear left him, Terminus's mere presence a relief. He schooled his faceplate into impassivity.

Trepan cocked his head a little and smiled. "We'll let you two get reacquainted." He rose. "Unless there are any other issues, Megatron?"

He didn't look at Terminus again, not wanting to give that much away. "No," he lied. "Nothing else."

"Good." Trepan paused in the act of turning away, then turned back and put a hand on Megatron's shoulder. Megatron flinched, involuntary, and the golden optics narrowed.

"If there is anything wrong, anything at all, you must tell me," said Trepan softly. "You understand that, do you not? You will be a medic, Megatron. Lives are at stake."

His intake dried. He felt an utter coward. But he nodded, shakily. "I will let you know about any difficulties," he said, sounding contrived to his own audials.

Trepan smiled, but there was something hard in his optics. "Very good. That is what I want to hear from such an important project."

Megatron nodded again, with just as little grace. "I will try to do you credit, sir."

"You're *joking*."

"Not at all," said Ratchet. Watching Pharma become so angry was far more entertaining than it should be, and he felt mildly guilty. "I'm tutoring him."

"Don't *do* this to me!" Pharma's wings flared in outrage. "I can't be connected with...with that fragging joke! You know everyone knows we're *conjunx*!"

"And anyone who actually knows us knows I've got the bleeding spark and you're practical," said Ratchet flatly. "My political inclinations aren't exactly secret. There's this clinic, you see..."

"First Aid would be a credit to both of us," said Pharma. "And here you are adopting this... this disgrace. Have you seen his scores?"

"Yes."

“Then why are you doing this? You haven’t gone senile, have you?”

“If I had, do you really think I’d notice?” said Ratchet, dryly. “It’s a favor for a friend, Pharma. It’ll be fine.”

“It will *not* be fine! You’re going to make us look like fools. You’re going to make *enemies*.”

“I could paper my clinic with my enemies, and you know it,” said Ratchet.

“They only let you keep that thing because you haven’t torqued off anyone actually important yet.”

Ratchet raised an eyebrow. “Do you know something I don’t know about the situation? What enemies could a *miner* have? Must be an exceptional miner.”

Pharma folded his arms with a huff. “The Functionists won’t like this.”

“The Functionists don’t like anything. They’ll live.” Ratchet went back to reading the course criteria and the lesson plans Lathe had put together.

“Ratchet...”

Ratchet raised a hand. “When you can talk to me without screaming, we can resume this conversation,” he said. It would torque Pharma off, but fraggit, he needed room to *vent*, and to think about this.

Pharma sighed and threw himself down next to Ratchet.

After a while he slid an arm around Ratchet, leaned his helm on Ratchet’s shoulder.

“Sweetspark...”

“I know you’re upset,” said Ratchet. “I’m sorry for that. But I’m not changing my processor.”

“I know,” said Pharma quietly. He brushed at some dirt on one of Ratchet’s pauldrons. “But I’m *worried* about you. Every time you go down to that clinic, I’m terrified. I’ve seen the welds from where some addict’s tried to eviscerate you. I saw those threats they sent you. Frag, you remember when I got surprised by those thugs.”

Guilt clenched Ratchet’s spark. Overlord had sent a pair of his bullies to the housing complex, and if those enforcers hadn’t happened to be passing by at that moment...

“I don’t *mind*, not when it’s my spark. But when I think about something happening to you,” Pharma’s hand clenched hard on Ratchet’s waist, “Primus, I can’t fragging face it, and you *know* it. The clinic’s bad enough, and now you’re sticking your neck out even further? Ratchet, please, don’t do this.”

Ratchet sighed and put the datapad down to draw Pharma close to him. “And who’s going to come get me?” he asked gruffly. “Unicron himself, rising from the ground? It’s not like I’m likely to be successful helping this mech. He’s no threat to anyone.” He brushed a kiss against the top of Pharma’s helm. “*I’m* no threat to anyone. Anyone in any kind of position of power knows that. I’m just crazy old Ratchet, they know that, and it keeps us safe.”

Pharma sighed. “I’m just worried about when it *won’t*. Sweetspark, I don’t know if your position is going to protect you forever. I don’t know if *mine* will. I’m hearing things.” He pushed himself up to look Ratchet in the optics. “Just because things have been all right this far doesn’t mean that they’re going to stay that way. There are Functionist officials all over the Academy, haven’t you

noticed? And one of them is far too interested in this Megatron, and *I don't want you in the middle of that*. Dead End thugs and crimelords are one thing, but the Functionists?"

Ratchet smiled, unsettled but in no mood to be frightened by that. "We'll manage. I'll keep my helm down, and we still have Shockwave."

Pharma sighed. "Yes. I hope we *continue* to have Shockwave."

"Don't be so negative," said Ratchet, leaned in to rest his helm against Pharma's. "This isn't my first pitfight, kid. *Trust* me. It will be all right."

Pharma made an annoyed noise against his helm, and pulled Ratchet into his lap. "That's what you always say. I hope you continue to be right." A hand pressed against his panel, gentle and inviting for all Pharma's assumed irritation. "Primus, old mech, why can't you sometimes let me take care of you?"

"Age before beauty," said Ratchet, turning in Pharma's arms to kiss him. He tasted good, he felt good, soft and warm under Ratchet's lips. "Can't have you getting complacent too early." He stroked the edge of one of Pharma's wings with his free hand, relishing the little noise this got him in return. It was nice to be worried over, as long as it didn't get too much in the way. "It's kind of you to worry," he murmured. "Really, it is. But this is important."

"Keeping you safe is important, too," said Pharma, and thankfully let it be at that.

Chapter 11

The moment they had some privacy, Terminus pulled him into a tight embrace. Megatron returned it without hesitation, as odd a gesture as it was. Terminus had never before been much interested in physical contact.

“Are you all right?” he asked after a time. “Was the trip from Messatine uneventful?”

Terminus laughed a little into his shoulder, soft and wry. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“It was as good as could be expected,” he said. “I have a job with the sanitation crews here.”

“That’s not fair,” said Megatron. “You’re qualified for far more than that.”

“No,” said Terminus. Flat. Accepting. “No. But you are.”

Megatron looked away, at the window, and said nothing. Terminus pulled away from the embrace, looking critically at him. “What is it?”

“I’m not doing well. At all.” He still couldn’t meet Terminus’s optics. “I’m failing most of my classes, Terminus. Maybe I really wasn’t made to be anything but a miner.”

“Don’t say that.” The sharpness of his friend’s voice startled him into looking up. “Primus, Megatron, don’t say that. You’re the most qualified of any of us to do this. *We need* you to do this.”

Megatron looked at him with puzzlement. “I can’t be. Terminus, you’re not stupid—you *would* do better at this than I am. Look.” He seized a datapad and thrust it into Terminus’s hands. “My scores for the last semester. My class rank, for the last semester. I’m not your best hope, Terminus. I can’t be. Because if I am...”

That means the Functionists are right. We can’t do the things other mecha can. He didn’t say it aloud. He didn’t need to.

Terminus looked at the scores a long time, then set the datapad aside and pulled Megatron in tight. “Did you expect this to be easy?” he asked. “You’ve got all sorts of...mining programming cluttering you up. You’re having to do this the hard way, actually learning, instead of putting bits of information in pre-determined spots in your brain. Primus, Megatron, no wonder you’re having a difficult time. It’s all right.”

To his shock, Megatron heard himself make a little whining noise, high-pitched and embarrassing. It felt so good to hold Terminus. To have someone who cared. Someone who didn’t think of him as a monster. Someone he knew would stay with him.

“It’s all right,” said Terminus again, and if Megatron had been more himself he would have been embarrassed. But the familiar voice was all he wanted to hear, and he curled in tight against his friend’s side, the comfort and relief so acute as to be painful, making the dread of the next day, the next failure, all the worse.

Megatron had pressed in close against him and fallen into recharge. Terminus didn't have the spark to dislodge him.

He looked down at Megatron and stroked his helm, marveling at being so close to him again. So close, but this time in good repair, without his energon leaking from the stumps of his legs, that familiar growing weakness. So close, and Megatron had his guard down. He could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he'd seen Megatron so open. His spark stirred at the trust it indicated.

He looked down at the other mech and smiled a little, even with the misery apparent in every line of Megatron's frame. *It will be all right*, he wanted to say. *We're together*.

But that wasn't true. He couldn't forget it wasn't true, not with Trepan watching them. Not with what had been done to his mind. Not with what they planned to make him do to Megatron.

Impulsively, he pulled Megatron closer. Leaned back to lower them both to the recharge slab's surface, curled around him.

He didn't want to let go. Primus, if Trepan ever wanted him to cooperate, offering to make it so he would never have to leave Megatron again—he would do it. He would do it without hesitation, no reprogramming needed. The thought horrified him, but was no less true for the horror.

The berth was big enough. No doubt medical students were expected to have rather more active interface lives than the sanitation crews. He curled up with his back to Megatron, putting himself between the other mech and the door.

“Ratchet, isn't it?”

“Mmm.” Ratchet kept his optics on the papers he was grading. Mentoring Megatron had come with some strings attached; he'd had to accept a teaching position for that term, as only active teaching faculty were allowed to mentor. So far, the introductory paper (a hypothetical scenario in which he'd given them a list of symptoms that very much did not correlate to any known illness) had gone badly indeed. Students didn't like things that refused to fall into neat boxes. Neither did medics. He was cheerfully flunking everyone who didn't acknowledge certain symptoms in order to make a diagnosis. So far, he'd passed two students, who'd flatly said that they had no idea what was going on and would consult colleagues. One of them was First Aid. The other was Megatron.

“I'm Trepan.”

“Mmm.”

“I greatly admire your work.”

“How nice.”

“I wanted to have a word with you about your new student.”

Now Ratchet did look up. “If it's to tell me how unlikely to succeed he is, it will only make me

more interested in mentoring him.”

“Of course,” said Trepan with an insincere smile. “I know that very well. I’m sure he’ll have the best chance possible with you.”

Ratchet’s optics narrowed. “Can I help you?”

“I just want you to consider the, ah, *political* wisdom of this decision,” said Trepan. “There are those who are deeply invested in not allowing miners to become medics. They may be, ah, indiscriminate in their displeasure.”

Ratchet raised his optic ridges. “Are you threatening me?”

“Advising.”

“Threatening.” Ratchet leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “Let’s not play games, Trepan. I know you and your record. I may not know the exact names of your patrons, but I know what they’re pulling for. And I very much doubt you’re in ignorance of *my* patron.”

“I am aware of Senator Shockwave’s interests, yes.”

“Then you’re also aware of his influence.” Ratchet smiled. “Don’t push me, Trepan. I know where I stand, and my aft is covered. Is yours?”

Trepan looked sidelong at him. “Political circumstances change,” he said. “People like us should avoid making enemies.”

“Mmm,” said Ratchet, looking back at the papers. “Now go away. I have work to do.”

He waited until Trepan was gone before sitting back with a heavy sigh and pinching his nasal guard. He wondered if he should tell Pharma about this. It would upset him, but it was his problem too.

But Shockwave still held considerable power. For the moment, at least, they were certainly safe.

He looked at Megatron’s paper again. Poor slagger. Who knew what he’d done to have so many people gunning for him. Ratchet was looking forward to finding out.

First day with a new instructor tomorrow. Megatron only kept himself from wringing his hands with anxiety by holding on to a data pad and muttering through its contents again. Ratchet, Ratchet the Hatchet, apparently had decided to come out of retirement to teach the practical surgery course. The older students muttered about what he was supposed to be like—*worse than Pharma*, they said, when the first-years were in earshot, and then grinned, congratulating themselves on having dodged *that* bullet.

And so far, looking at the assignments, Ratchet the Hatchet sure as frag lived up to his reputation. First that fragging essay—and for Megatron, it had been a special nightmare. Words did not come easily to him. He’d sat up most of the night, painstakingly piecing it together, refusing Terminus’s help. He had to do this on his own. And now, apparently there was going to be a practical. A simple exploratory surgery to check a t-cog, performed on a hologram. But frag, they were

expected to learn it out of a book, then perform it in front of Ratchet and the rest of the class while he evaluated him.

Megatron groaned. He was fragged. He was barely passing the *easy* classes. Ratchet was a fragging *nightmare*, and these assignments were fragging nightmares, and this was it. He was *definitely* going to fail tomorrow. Never mind that he could recite the entire surgery by heart, he was *sure* something was going to go horribly, horribly wrong.

He looked over at Terminus, blissfully in recharge. Terminus who believed in him far more than he should. He hadn't seen the quarters assigned to the sanitation crews, but he was willing to bet that this little room was a great improvement. Terminus had mentioned things that made him think that he wasn't having the best time with the other members of the crews, either. He was more than happy to offer a refuge. More than happy for the company. At this rate, Terminus used his recharge slab more than he did.

He looked at the time. An hour before class. Time to find some fuel.

He arrived on time, still staring at his datapad, the enegex curdling in his tank with anxiety.

Ratchet was even smaller than he'd expected. Small, red and white, blue optics, hooked nasal ridge, frowning. That frown made up for his size. Someone behind Megatron dropped their datapad with a clatter.

Ratchet just looked at them.

"You should know this surgery," he said. "You've certainly read about it enough, if they still teach the way they did when I was a student." He smiled. It was worse than the frown. By a lot. "If not, well, I've given you two days to review it. That should be *plenty*. Now, who's first?"

He looked over the crowd. Megatron abruptly realized just how tall he was compared to the rest of his compatriots and froze.

"You," said Ratchet, pointing at him. "You with the datapad. Come on. We don't have all day." Pause. "Actually, we do have all day, but I'll get bored. Come on. The hologram won't bite. That's what I'm paid for."

Nervous laughter from the rest of the students. Megatron took a step forward, carefully put the datapad down on the tray for personal supplies.

"We won't be having you practice scrubbing in because this is a hologram, and I want to have an idea of your surgical knowledge, not your hygiene routine," said Ratchet. "Come *on*. It's not going to take any of your fingers off. Now, what are you doing?"

"Exploratory surgery to assess the state of a heavily armored patient's t-cog."

"And what circumstances is this used in?"

"When a patient presents with difficulty transforming or any of the associated complaints, but is

too heavily armored for a standard medical scan to retrieve accurate data, or when such equipment is not available, or is malfunctioning, and the patient's condition is time-sensitive. Also an older procedure, from before accurate medical scans."

"Excellent. You can cogently regurgitate a textbook." Ratchet turned on the holoimager and a featureless Cybertronian form rippled into being, along with a set of tools. Megatron blinked at him, still trying to figure out how to parse that *excellent*. Ratchet gestured impatiently. "Get to work, kid."

He took a deep vent, selected the armor-saw, and approached the dummy. He took another deep vent, and started talking, matching his movements to the instructions, measuring, making the first incisions to lift the armor back. Got past the first layer of energon and hydraulic lines and—

—it happened. His processor froze. Went blank. He didn't remember what he was doing. Didn't remember the next gesture, as many times as he'd practiced it in the air over his desk. Didn't know which scalpel was the right one. It was as if someone had wiped his mind free of everything. He looked down into the patient's inner workings, frozen, watched the pulse of energon through the fuel pump, felt the panic well up hard in the back of his throat.

"Calm down," said Ratchet, sounding very far away. "Lift the scalpel. That's it. Now, repeat with me..."

He did. Dull, despairing at first. He was going to fail. They didn't let you continue if you couldn't do this surgery. He'd been studying for *weeks*, and he was going to fail.

Soon, Ratchet had him matching gestures to words, completing the surgery, welding the armor shut.

"Now," said Ratchet, as the holo-tools vanished from Megatron's hands, "What just happened to—what's your name, kid?"

"Megatron." Quiet, grudging. He didn't want that attached to his name. Not ever.

"What just happened to Megatron here will happen to thirty-six percent of you within the next year. It's called a processor skip. It happens. If it happens once, it happens again. But it won't kill your career; there are accommodations. There are accommodations, or we wouldn't have medics. Accordingly, report it so that you can receive help. Doing otherwise puts your patients in danger. Am I clear?"

"Yes sir," they chorused.

Megatron just stepped back. For someone online to be a medic, fine. Maybe what Ratchet said was right. But for him—no, he wouldn't get that chance. Trepan wouldn't care that it was common. Not at all, just that the mech he'd picked to demonstrate miners could become medics was defective.

His hands were shaking. He clenched them around the datapad, and wished for the class to be over.

Hours later, it was. Megatron turned with the rest of them, but the sound of Ratchet resetting his vocalizer stopped him in his tracks. “Megatron. A moment.”

He froze, forced himself to turn and lift his optics from the ground.

“You know, what was interesting about that is that usually, processor skips affect Forged mecha,” said Ratchet. “My best guess is that you were badly reprogrammed. It’s more common than you might think, actually. There are ways to work around it. I’ve had a few interns with variations on this as well.” He smiled at Megatron. It wasn’t a terrifying smile, which seemed very strange. “It’s nothing to do with whether or not you’re ‘inherently’ suited or unsuited to the work of a medic.”

“Thank you,” said Megatron. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I’m your new mentor,” said Ratchet. “Dear old Lathe is off for a much needed sabbatical, and I wanted to step in. Make sure that my teaching skills don’t rust.”

Megatron blinked at him. He couldn’t believe it. “Sir... you took me on?” he repeated.

“Yes.”

“But I’m a failure.”

“You’re still here,” Ratchet pointed out. “And you’ve managed that with a fairly substantial processor malfunction. That’s not failure, that’s impressive. But you’re not going to like the solution.”

“The solution,” Megatron repeated dully.

And now the terrifying smile made its return. “*Lots* of practice,” said Ratchet. “Give me your schedule.”

Megatron did.

“Hm.” Ratchet did a few things to it. “There you are. See you here first thing tomorrow morning.”

Megatron took the schedule back and stared. Everything he’d thought was free time had been blocked out in red, labeled *practice*. *Practice* was misspelled. He looked up again. Ratchet was still grinning.

“Having me as your mentor is going to be a *lot* more work,” he said, worryingly cheerful. “Now go. Fuel and recharge. You’ll need it.”

Chapter 12

“You’re going to damage him, the way you’re working him. He’s not mining equipment.”

Ratchet peered over a datapad at the mech who’d just barged into his office, one of the sanitation crew. “And you would be...?”

The mech’s hands clenched in front of him. “Terminus.”

“And the ‘he’ in question would be?”

Terminus looked away. “Your new student. Megatron.”

“Mmm hmm.” Ratchet put the datapad aside. “And this outpouring of concern...?”

“You’re damaging him. He barely recharges. Barely fuels. He’s always working on something or other, always studying—you’re going to break him.”

“Your friend is a whole Pit of a lot tougher than he looks, did you know that?”

“You’re still—,”

“Damaging him. Yes, I know. What’s it to you?”

“I’m his friend.” The other mech lifted his head, glared at Ratchet. “His *only* friend here, don’t pretend otherwise.”

“Oh, I’m most certainly not his friend,” said Ratchet. “I’m his mentor. I’m here to help him *survive* medical school. And I know damned well I’m pushing him. If I don’t, he’ll crash and burn. If you’re his friend, you know what that’ll mean for him.”

Terminus looked down.

“And maybe you could tell me,” said Ratchet, which prompted a frantic head shake.

He lowered his voice. “Look, I’m as worried about Megatron as you are. I’m moderately sure that if he flunks, he’ll be found face-down in some gutter somewhere. Probably be ruled suicide. He’s a smart kid. I don’t want that to happen.”

Terminus looked back up at him, optic ridges snapping down. “And how do I know we can trust you?”

“You don’t,” said Ratchet. “You’ve just got my word. How do you know him, anyway?”

“We’re friends,” said Terminus.

“Mm. I see.” Ratchet looked the mech over. Miner, definitely, but the legs... “Who the Pit fitted those things?” he snapped, looking at the ill fit and the way the metals above them swelled with nanite activity. Not perceptible to the untrained optic, but those stumps must hurt. “They wouldn’t know a prosthesis from their exhaust port. Did they even do a follow-up? Primus, mech, how can you fragging *walk*? Here, I can take a look and adjust them, they’re simple enough—”

He didn’t expect Terminus’s optics to go wide with alarm, for the mech to stammer, “They’re fine. I’m fine. Really!” and limp from the room as if Ratchet had threatened to examine his spark, not

his legs.

Ratchet watched him go, folded his arms. “I *do* have a medical degree,” he muttered after Terminus. Then frowned.

He was Megatron’s friend, wasn’t he? Time to consult Megatron.

But Megatron was in just as bad shape as his friend. The scars were just a little less obvious.

“Megatron, I’d like your permission to examine your brain.” At Megatron’s frankly alarmed and horrified expression, he sighed. “Look, I’m not a specialist. Visual inspection only. What I’d like to do is see if I can’t consult one of my colleagues who is a specialist, and see if the reason behind your processor skips is something to do with your reprogramming. It might—*might*—give me an idea of it’s easily repairable or not, or if you’re just going to have to learn how to work around it.”

“What would the procedure entail?” asked Megatron, but seemed more curious than suspicious now.

“You’d remove your helmet, and I’d look at the surface of your brain module with an ultraviolet light, to pick up the scarring. I’d then take about two to three image captures, without any identifying features, to use to consult this colleague. That’s all.”

Megatron hesitated, then nodded. “That would be all right.” He reached up to disengage his helmet, removing it carefully, then slowly shifting the flanges of his protective crest—Ratchet, who knew some mining models had them, but had yet to see one in person, raised his brows; it was quite impressive—out of the way to expose his brain.

“There you are,” Ratchet said out loud, and lifted the ultraviolet light. “Now, I’m going to dim the lights in the room so the scars actually show up, all right?”

Megatron nodded, jerkily. He didn’t look happy.

“We don’t have to do this.”

“I know. Please get it over with.”

“All right.” Ratchet dimmed the lights, put a hand on Megatron’s shoulder, feeling the way the mech trembled under his palm. Primus, not a good story here, he was sure of it. He’d seen nothing of the kid’s brain, but he was sure there was something very, very bad under those flanges. “Just hold still, kid. I’m right here.”

He clicked the UV light on and hissed air through his dentae. He couldn’t help it. He knew better.

But the kid’s processor lit up like a nebula.

That wasn’t a fragging reprogramming.

“Sir?” said Megatron, very quiet, very hesitant.

This is a fragging butcher job. No one should have holes like that in their brain. Ratchet felt sick, wanted to curse, managed instead, “Sorry, kid, first time for me really seeing the result of a reprogramming. Took me by surprise, is all.” He patted Megatron’s shoulder again. “Don’t mind me. Hold still while I get the image captures, and we’ll see what Rung makes of it, all right?”

“His name is Rung?”

“Yep. And if you can remember it, you’ll have a friend for life. Okay, and we’re done. Lights.”

He stepped away, turned off the UV light with relief that he didn’t have to look down at that horrific scarring anymore. Hoped he’d stop looking like he’d seen a ghost before Megatron saw him. “Well,” he said aloud, “It’s definitely beyond my capabilities. We’ll see what we can do, but in the meantime, let’s get back to that surgery, shall we?”

“Practice makes perfect?” Megatron sounded rather wry.

“You said it, not me. Come on, I don’t have all day.” He should say something more, he really should, but if someone had done that to the kid’s processor...

One of two things might happen if he let this out. They might do worse, and come after him, or they might simply kill the evidence. Primus. No, he was going to sit on this one for a bit. Until, at least, he’d consulted Shockwave.

Megatron was shaking. He couldn’t stop shaking. Ratchet hadn’t done anything, hadn’t even touched him, but he felt sick. He didn’t understand; he had no memories of being reprogrammed. It couldn’t have been that bad, surely?

He huddled himself on the recharge slab, looking blankly at the datapad he was supposed to be studying. He closed his optics. Under his helmet, he felt his protective flanges clamp harder around his brain.

Ratchet had looked horrified.

Was there something wrong with him? Wouldn’t Ratchet have told him if there was? But Ratchet thought there was something wrong with him, or he wouldn’t have done the scan in the first place. He’d seen Ratchet talk about the most horrifying things without a ruffled plate, things that were incurable, that killed the patient in days, gruesome and agonizing, and yet, Ratchet had been horrified, hadn’t quite managed to wipe it from his faceplate before Megatron had seen it. What the frag could be wrong with him that would make him react like that?

Megatron turned the datapad in his hands, distracted. He quickly lost his place in the textbook, but it didn’t seem to matter.

First Aid had also been horrified by him. He didn’t know why, even now. Just that it was so bad that the little doctor had fled from him. Refused to have anything more to do with him.

Terminus treated him as if he were fragile. Terminus! Who knew him better than anyone. Knew what he’d had to survive in the mines.

There was something wrong with him. And whatever it was, it frightened Ratchet. It’d scared First Aid so badly, scared *and* revolted, that he’d never wanted anything more to do with Megatron. Even Terminus feared it.

It was something to do with his brain.

He couldn’t imagine what.

He put the datapad down. Gathered his knees up against his chest and stared at the wall. He needed to be studying, to be working, but he couldn't find the spark for it just now.

He still hadn't stopped shaking.

Chapter 13

“This isn’t *working*,” snarled Trepan. “They’ve got *Ratchet* mentoring him. He’ll figure it out, I’m sure.”

“Ratchet is an idealist,” said one of his companions. “He cannot be reasoned with easily. But his *conjunx*...”

Trepan shook his head. “No. Pharma won’t work. Ratchet didn’t listen to him about the clinic. He won’t about this.”

“What would you recommend? This is, after all, your project.”

Fear drizzled down Trepan’s backstrut. There was an edge to that statement. *You’re on thin ice*, he’d heard once from an alien during a regrettably unavoidable interaction. Knowing how ice behaved on organic planets, the comparison was apt. Even if he hadn’t known how ice behaved on organic planets, the fallout of that conversation was informative enough.

On thin ice, and it was beginning to break, thanks to the warm-sparked ministrations of one Ratchet. The bot lived up to his nickname in all areas except for Megatron. What had that slag-sucker done to so enchant a brilliant mind like Ratchet’s?

Alleging that Megatron was fragging his mentor wouldn’t work. People would laugh. Why the frag would Ratchet go for a miner when he had someone like Pharma in his berth every evening? Barring that, there were sexier mecha in the Dead End. A fetish for labor-class frames? Maybe, but that was material for rumors. It wasn’t actionable. It wouldn’t get Megatron kicked out of the medical academy. It wouldn’t disgrace him enough, just Ratchet... and for now, he’d prefer to leave Ratchet alone. The medic was too well guarded.

“We need to have Megatron expelled.” *And I don’t know how.*

“Hm.”

“It’s the only way.”

“It will be difficult.”

“Well, think of something!” Trepan heard his own voice go shrill with panic. Regretted it instantly.

“Have a care, Trepan,” one of them said. “We’ve been patient so far. You promised us a spectacular success.”

“If we need to take more drastic measures to contain...this experiment,” said another, “we will.”

Trepan nodded, hastily. “After all,” he said, “the mech *is* disposable class...”

“Yes,” said someone. “He is.”

Terminus came back late. One of the introductory laboratory sections had left the classroom a mess. The instructors most certainly weren’t going to clean it up. He’d spent most of the evening scraping turbofox guts out of the sink; it was a surprisingly warm day, and the drying fluids had

formed what was best described as glue. Stinking glue. He never thought he'd think this, but it made him miss mining.

He opened the door to Megatron's habsuite and stopped on the threshold. It was dark. He could make out, once his optics adjusted, a huddled mass on Megatron's recharge slab. He stepped inside.

His hands shook. For a moment he imagined Megatron dead. He could far too easily imagine Trepan becoming impatient, killing Megatron out of frustration. But after a moment, Megatron's optics flicked on, a dim blue glow.

Terminus let out a breath. "There you are," he said softly, and crossed to the recharge slab. After a moment, he climbed onto it next to Megatron. "What happened?"

"Nothing," said Megatron, too quickly. But he leaned back against Terminus's shoulder. "It's fine."

"This doesn't look like nothing," said Terminus. He reached out, greatly daring, and put a hand on Megatron's treads.

Megatron slowly turned to look at him. "Terminus," he said, hesitated. "Terminus, there's something wrong with me, isn't there? The way you act, the way...the way Ratchet—"

Terminus felt his lips lift away from his dentae. "What did he do?"

"Nothing, it's fine, just—"

"What did he do?"

Megatron looked away. "Nothing. He just wanted a look at my brain. See if something about the reprogramming was why I have the processor skips."

Terminus stilled, torn between delight the bastard of a medic had thought to check, and horror. If the truth got out, if Trepan found out Ratchet was onto him, if his little experiment became public, Terminus had no idea of how he'd react. But he very much doubted he or Megatron would survive.

"It... It's unsettled me," said Megatron, and Terminus could *feel* him shaking. "I don't understand. I don't remember the reprogramming, but I guess I don't like my brain being exposed."

Of course not, Terminus thought. The last time it had probably been exposed, it had been Trepan, rooting around in Megatron's unwilling mind. Had probably had him conscious for the whole thing, if it had been anything like what he'd done to Terminus. Then, he'd erased Megatron's memories, leaving him with a terror anchored to, as far as he could tell, nothing.

His hatred of Trepan rose in the back of his throat, venomous and futile.

"You're in good hands," he said aloud, and pulled Megatron closer to him. Megatron moved, wrapped an arm around Terminus in return, clinging with a desperate strength. Maybe he should tell Megatron to get away from Ratchet, to not let him pick his brains—but Terminus couldn't bring himself to it. Megatron needed all the help he could get.

"You treat me differently, since the reformatting," Megatron said, muffled by his chest. "Like you think I might break, if you do something even slightly wrong."

That's because it's true, he wished he could say. Instead, he rested his helm against Megatron's.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re under so much stress. I would never want to add to it. But Megatron...whatever happens, I’ll be here.”

Megatron lifted his helm away, turned so he could look Terminus in the optics again. He smiled a little, sadly. “Thank you.”

For a moment, Terminus wanted to lean forward, kiss Megatron, curl around him. Show him acceptance. How much he meant this. He’d undergo the *conjux ritus*, had either of them anything to give the other, any time for gestures.

The moment passed. He pulled a little away, alarmed at his thoughts. Hesitated. “Have you fueled?”

“No,” said Megatron.

“First things first,” said Terminus, and coaxed him from the slab and out the door. At least he could do this much.

“It’s a processor skip,” said Ratchet to Shockwave over a cube of energon. “Common, common learning disability in Forged mecha, which is weird, because he isn’t one. Testament we can build things better than God, at least. Cheers me up. Anyway, accommodations can be made.” He looked thoughtful. “I’d bet he didn’t have it before he was reformatted. Bad enough in a medic—patient lives and all that—but in a miner, with no assistance available? Kills you. He’s old enough it should have gotten him by now.”

Shockwave snorted. “Since when does Trepan play fair? He needs your help, Ratchet. And your protection.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that.” Ratchet let out a long huff of air. “I took a look at the kid’s brain. Thought I could talk to Rung about what might have gone wrong, and how to fix it. I’ve got the image captures—”

But Shockwave put a hand on his before he could reach for the datapad, leaned forward, optics suddenly wide. The hand on his tightened to the point of pain.

“Primus, Ratchet,” Shockwave said, and it was the first time Ratchet had ever heard him truly alarmed. “Don’t—don’t ask why he’s like this. Don’t. Just work with him. Help him succeed. Primus, I hope no one noticed.”

“Why?” snapped Ratchet. “In order to figure out how to work with him, I have to figure out what the damage is. And it *is* damage, Shockwave. Someone did a fragging butcher job on the poor mech’s processor.”

“Because I can’t protect you from everyone,” said Shockwave. “Leave it alone, Ratchet. Just get him through this.” He looked at the pad Ratchet had been reaching for. “Destroy that. Tonight.”

Ratchet carefully withdrew his hand from Shockwave’s. “That bad, huh?”

“I can’t protect you from everything,” Shockwave repeated, and refused to say more.

Chapter 14

Megatron's friend was in his office again.

Ratchet raised his eyebrows at the other mech. "Hello. Anything I can do for you, or will you just be yelling at me for treating Megatron like a drone again?"

The other mech had the decency to look embarrassed. "I wanted to say thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"Looking..." he trailed off, shifting uncomfortably. "Looking out for him. With the processor skips, and all." The mech didn't look up at him, his optics fixed on the ground. Ratchet's suspicion grew, but he didn't say anything. He rose and stepped around the table.

"Least I could do," he said. "He's my student, and I will make sure he gets through this. Now, you have your own issue. You want to come with me and get that fixed?"

"I should be working..."

"Nonsense," said Ratchet. "Your supervisor is violating a number of hospital codes, having you run around like that. Maintenance, is it? Well, I know just the mech to contact." He opened a channel in his commsuite, ignoring the expression on the other bot's face. "Hello. Grout, isn't it? Yes. This is Ratchet. I've got one of your bots here. He's got a joint issue; I'll take care of it. Which one? Firstly, you expect me to be able to tell them apart, and secondly, you mean to tell me you have *multiple* bots who might be working *on bad joints*? Tell you what, you don't ask me for a name, and I won't mention you said that, does that sound fair? ...It better. Or I'm going to have words with someone. And I'll be keeping a closer eye on your people in the future, if that's the way you're doing things. Prompt maintenance, Grout, it's important, and it's mandated by the hospital board of governors." Ratchet grinned to himself. Listening to Grout squirm did something to alleviate the bad mood he'd been in since talking with Shockwave that night. "Good, good. You have a good evening now."

"Thank you," said Terminus, once he'd closed the line. "For not bringing my name into it."

"You're welcome," said Ratchet. "I know how that old gasket works. I wouldn't trust him with a nonsentient drone, the way he treats people, but the higher-ups don't agree with me. He still threaten you with the mines if you miss time?"

"Regardless of reason," said Terminus, dourly.

"Thought as much. Come along." Ratchet led the way into his diagnostic space. A partly-disassembled drivetrain sat in the middle of one of the benches. Terminus recoiled. "Sorry. Megatron was working on that before you came in; he's in class. It's better than a hologram, and don't worry, it's just a model."

It wasn't a model, actually, but a teaching specimen. Terminus, however, was skittish enough. Ratchet doubted that assurances that the specimen was ancient would much help the other mech. "Come on, patients over here. Away from the lab space." He gave Terminus a quick grin.

Terminus didn't quite return it, but the mech's halting steps sped a little.

"Megatron's due back in two hours or so," said Ratchet. "I'd like him to learn how to do this—or

at least, whatever's left of it once he returns. Would that be okay? I expect having a friend around might make it a little less unpleasant."

Terminus nodded, jerky. "Yes. Yes, it would."

"Good," said Ratchet, and set to work.

Megatron returned to the lab to find Terminus there, both prosthetics disconnected, and Ratchet next to him working on one of them, talking rapidly but calmly about the mechanisms. He paused in the door.

"Good to see you," said Ratchet. "Come over here. I'm going to teach you how to adjust prosthetics."

Terminus, who'd propped himself up on an elbow to watch Ratchet, managed a weak wave. Megatron smiled in return, and did as he was told.

He'd had no idea Terminus was in such discomfort. He was horrified that he'd missed it, but it was obvious Terminus had tried to hide it from him. Probably because Terminus hadn't wanted him to worry, he thought, frowning at the mech in question.

Yes, there it was. Terminus definitely looked guilty.

Megatron smiled a little at that, shook his helm, and went back to work.

It was several hours later when Ratchet let him go. Terminus, though they'd finished with him earlier, had elected to hang around, with the excuse that he was testing the prosthetics.

"You're good with your hands," Terminus said, as they crossed the crystal gardens outside of Ratchet's building. "You did a lot of that without even hesitating. I'm impressed."

Megatron smiled again. "I'm just glad Ratchet was able to help you," he said, and Terminus's hand bumped his. He turned his hand over, instinctively, and on an impulse took Terminus's.

Terminus held very still, their fingers laced together. Looked into his optics with surprise. And, if he saw right, no little delight.

"Tell me if something hurts next time," he said. "Ratchet will help with it."

Terminus looked guilty again, so absurdly guilty about his rather minor mistake that Megatron couldn't help but chuckle. He tightened his hand on Terminus's. "It's all right! It's only because I want to make sure you get the help you need!"

Terminus looked down at their hands. Raised them, then, as if he feared he'd lose his courage, pressed a kiss to the back of Megatron's. Then started walking again, towing a startled Megatron along behind him.

"Lovebirds," said Ratchet, and closed his blinds. "Great."

Perhaps it wasn't exactly polite to spy on one's own protege, but after Shockwave's refusal, he needed every crumb of information he could get. Everything pointed to Megatron being in deep

slag. He wasn't sure how Terminus fit into the whole mess, just that someone had seen fit to pull him from the mines to—to what? Babysit Megatron? Spy on him, most likely. He bet he'd see the same constellation of wreckage if he looked at Terminus's brain. He would bet even more that Terminus wouldn't let him get close enough to do that. He'd been terrified enough over the prosthetics. Yes, probably a spy of some sort for the Functionists, but not one in good odor. Spying was probably intended to be as much of a punishment for him as it was for Megatron.

Primus, what a fragging mess.

At least Megatron and Terminus had each other. Even if one of them was a spy. He hoped for the best for them. They probably didn't have a frag of a lot else to celebrate.

And at least neither of them seemed to have nearly as nasty a temper as he or Pharma did. Barring Trepan's meddling, they should be more or less all right.

He packed up his things and started back toward home. He'd destroyed the image captures, as Shockwave had recommended. But he knew better than to think that fixed it all. Someone else could have found out. He didn't bother with thinking about how impossible it'd be, or of how someone could have possibly overheard them. He just made the assumption that someone would have found out, because the risk of being caught unawares was so enormous.

He didn't think they would come after him. He was a far more difficult target, even if whoever was behind this frightened Shockwave. They'd go for the easy prey first. Only if that didn't work would they aim for him.

He hesitated. Did he dare put Pharma in such danger? Because if he decided to support Megatron, ensure that the youngster didn't end up face-down in a gutter somewhere, he wasn't just risking his own frame, but Pharma's as well.

He'd thought much the same about his Dead End clinic. It hadn't stopped him then.

He'd already made up his mind, he knew. He felt terrible for it. He hadn't even consulted Pharma, because he knew what Pharma's response would be—horror, anger, pleading with Ratchet to consider his career, *their* careers. He remembered Overlord's thugs on their stoop. The people that might come after them were worse than Overlord's thugs, he knew that intellectually, but not really. He couldn't imagine much worse.

But he couldn't let Trepan and his friends doom that bright, earnest young mech whose mind they'd already brutally savaged. He couldn't stand letting Terminus return to ill-fitting, agonizing prosthetics, or to none at all and a death of starvation. He couldn't. It went against every strut in his frame.

Ratchet stepped out into the evening, sighed heavily, and went home to Pharma, feeling both tired and angry. He hoped Pharma was in a good mood. He was in no mind to be the bigger bot.

He got the message the next morning, hastily scrawled on a piece of scrap metal and slipped to him in the corridor.

Megatron just called into Program Director's office. Help him.

—T

Chapter 15

Neither of them was ready for interface. They figured that out early on. They wanted to, but it seemed too soon. It would be a *one day* sort of thing right now.

Megatron, instead, bought them energon from a small restaurant. It was the first time Terminus had been to a restaurant, and he sat with great interest, unsure of what to expect from his flavored energon, amazed at the people passing by. He'd been in mines his entire function, or shuttled between them. He'd taken his rations, a miner's only form of pay on the distant planets he'd been assigned to. None of the mining outposts he'd been on had been like Megatron's first, where their rations had been supplemented by the very occasional shainx, often too little to buy the quantity of energon that otherwise would have been provided through their rations.

So Terminus sat and was amazed, and Megatron watched him, feeling the altogether stupid smile on his face and not caring. It was about time he could do something for Terminus, who had done so much for him. Had followed him all the way back here, had been such an emotional support to him in these last weeks. It wasn't just Ratchet who'd brought his grades up; it was Terminus too, Terminus's friendly, undemanding presence.

For a moment, he dared to think of the future. If he did make it through, he would be a medic. He would make enough to support both of them. Maybe even make enough to support Terminus through the function exempting process, get him a job that didn't demand heavy labor. Academic editing, something like that.

He wanted to see Terminus happy. There'd been enough unhappiness for the both of them. But especially Terminus.

He loved Terminus.

He wasn't sure where it had come from. The last few weeks, he'd felt it but not named it, but anything before his reprogramming was an uncertain haze. Was it from then? He knew Terminus had been present then. He knew he'd trusted Terminus, had been greatly fond of Terminus. That the two of them had held the same ideals. Terminus had encouraged him—

...to what, exactly?

He frowned. He'd run across another blank in his mind, and he didn't like it. This one felt important. To his spark. To the mech sitting across from him. Some blockage in their relationship.

He felt a small curl of anger, but then their energon was placed in front of them, and he wiped the discontent from his faceplate before it could be seen. Instead, he watched Terminus sample his energon, incredulously tentative. It made him chuckle, particularly as Terminus apparently found he quite liked the flavor, and drank with barely-restrained eagerness.

They could do this more often, he thought. If he made it through.

He would make it through. This was more of a reason than any of his abstract imaginings. Terminus pleased and a little wondering. Terminus happy. The wrongs of their past made right.

Where had that thought come from? It was gone as quickly as it had arrived, a quicksilver flash.

Terminus noticed nothing of his inner turmoil, and they stepped back into the evening. They didn't quite dare to touch, not on the street, but once Megatron's habsuite door closed behind them

Terminus's arms were around him. Greatly daring, Megatron leaned forward and kissed him full on the intake, delighted at the noise he made, at the way Terminus's arms came up to catch at his helm, the way Terminus's mouth slanted over his to gain better access. He could still taste the energon on Terminus's glossa—Terminus was right, it was delicious. With a little moan, he allowed Terminus to push him up against the wall of the habsuite, glad of the support at his back. He ran hands up and down Terminus's waist, back, reveling in the hot metal under his fingers, the thrum of Terminus's powerful engine, lost himself in the smell of oil and hot metal. He didn't want to stop.

Terminus lifted away from his mouth and kissed down his neck cables. Once over his spark. Stepped back and guided them to the berth. "It's already late," he said, soft, vocalizer fritzing.

Late, but Megatron's frame thrummed with excitement and joy. He allowed himself to be led, settled next to Terminus and curled himself around the other mech. Nuzzled his neck cables in turn, wrapped his arms around him and clung.

Terminus laughed a little, as if Megatron weren't the first such clingy lover he'd had. Megatron himself was taken aback at his own feelings; he was experienced, but his brief relationship with Impactor had been one altogether more carnal. More of a friendship, punctuated by enthusiastic interface. Not this tenderness. Not this type of feeling, this reluctance to be separated. This delight in cuddling alone.

He rested his helm on Terminus's shoulder, and smiling, slid into recharge.

The next morning, one of the clerical bots pulled him aside. "You're wanted in the program director's office," he said. "Come along."

Megatron followed. "Sir, I have class in ten minutes."

The bot snorted. "That's the last thing you should be worrying about. Hurry up."

Megatron hurried, dread curling around his spark. He saw Terminus out of the corner of his optic as he made the turn into the office, saw the alarm on the other mech's face, and then the door closed behind him.

Leaving him standing, alone, before three other mecha, all painted like medics. Trepan stood in the back, looking solemn.

"Megatron," said the first mech. "Have a seat."

He sat, the dread rising in his intakes. Looked around. Not a single friendly face here.

"We have your grades from last term," said that same mech. The program director. Megatron glanced at Trepan in the back.

"Cumulative, of course," said another of them.

"Yes, of course."

A long silence. Megatron closed his hands over each other to keep them still.

"Well, there's no point in drawing it out," said the program director, a harshness to his words.

“Megatron of Tarn, you are not performing at the levels this institution expects. You’ll be dismissed. I doubt you’ll have much to pack.”

“What?” he said, all he could manage, and it came out small and brittle. Weak, and briefly he hated himself for it.

“I doubt you have a malfunction with your audials, mech,” said the program director. “That’s all there is to it.”

“But I’ve brought them up, this term,” he said. Plaintive. He hated the way he sounded. He wanted to shout at them, throw the injustice of this back in their faces, but he could not. It would only make him look like a brute.

“Too little, too late,” said someone else.

He dared look up at Trepan. Trepan looked sternly back at him, and the utter disappointment in the golden optics made him bow his head immediately.

“One more term,” he heard himself say. “Please. Let me finish this term. I’ll make you proud, I swear.”

“No,” said the program director. “We’ve reached our decision, Megatron. There’s no point to protesting.”

“My grades this term have been improving,” he said. “Just give me this one term, I won’t let you down.”

There was a little sigh from one of the mecha sitting next to the program director. “It’s not about blame at this point,” he said, with a false sort of kindness. “It’s about what’s best for *you*, Megatron. We want you to be happy.”

“And obviously, that’s not here,” said another. “We know you’ve been working very hard—as he said, there’s no blame. You’ve done your best. We don’t want you to be stuck here, feeling second-class and working three times harder than anyone else to no effect. No, this is not right for you, and we don’t want to force you into it.”

“That’s right,” said the program director. “Frankly, we’ve never seen a student work as hard as you have. But what matters are results. You’ve been online a while now, Megatron. I’m sure it’s a strain on your dignity to always be playing catch-up to a batch of newsparks, and it’s not working. We shouldn’t keep forcing you into this position.”

“But I don’t *mind*,” said Megatron, desperate. Angry. Who the frag were they to decide this was too much of a strain?

“Don’t make this any harder than it has to be, Megatron,” said the program director, and Megatron saw a flicker of anger in his optics. “As I said, we’ve made our decision, and it’s not up to debate—the frag is going on out there?”

Megatron startled at his raised voice, looked over his shoulder. There seemed to be a certain amount of shouting going on in the corridor. Then a door slammed and something went thud.

The clerical bot showed up again in the doorframe, looking harried. “Sirs. Ratchet would like—”

He was whisked out of the way by Ratchet himself, who swept in and slammed the door shut with a fist on the controls behind him.

Silence.

“Since when,” said Ratchet, sounding pleasant, “is it the custom at this institution to hold a hearing for academic underperformance in the absence of the student’s mentor?”

Megatron dared a glance back at the panel.

Everyone was looking uncertain. Even the program director.

“Er,” he said. “Since this is, um, an extraordinary case...”

“The short answer is, since *never*,” said Ratchet, and settled himself on the desk. “Hello Trepan, nice to see you. Does this actually have anything to do with you? I didn’t know it was a practice to let non-faculty in on these things, Carapace. And I just re-read our policies yesterday, imagine that.”

Silence again.

“Student confidentiality,” said Ratchet, cheerfully. “Oh, and these are supposed to take place at the end of semesters, aren’t they? Student’s also supposed to have sympathetic representation. And be given two weeks to prepare their statements.”

Megatron dared another look at Trepan. The little mech looked like he wanted to strangle Ratchet. There was an audible click as his needles slid in and out, a sound that sent pure terror lancing through Megatron’s spark. He mastered himself with an effort, looked to where Ratchet sat, smirking.

“This is so very irregular,” said Ratchet. “It can hardly be an official meeting at all, can it? Because if so, you’ve violated a lot of your very own rules. If Megatron chose to challenge any decision made in this room, it would be very difficult to mount any kind of defense.”

“We were merely informing him he was on academic probation—,” started the program director. Ratchet waved a finger at him.

“Ep ep ep, no. That requires all the things I just listed. Not going to work.”

Silence again.

“An informal notification to the student that he *might* be placed on probation.”

“Then what’s he doing here?” Ratchet pointed to Trepan. “You going to fix the ham-handed reprogramming job?”

“It needs no fixing,” said Trepan.

Ratchet snorted. Turned his attention back to the program director. *Stared.*

“Um,” said the program director. Looked around. Looked at Ratchet. “A, um, friendly chat? With people...invested in the project!”

“There we go,” said Ratchet with great satisfaction. “Well, as the person best qualified to represent Megatron’s academic progress, let me say that I am *delighted* with his work. Rarely have I had such a willing and able student. Of course, he has a slight processor skip, but so do so many of our Forged medics. We are, of course, *absolutely* capable of handling this.” His grin grew wicked. “As I’m sure several in this room can attest. After all, I did teach at least two of you drivetrain anatomy,

and I should hope it stuck.”

“You’re joking,” said Trepan flatly.

“Not in the slightest. Thank you, Trepan. To think you found this little gem at the bottom of a mining shaft. Well *done*.” He looked around at the stunned faces. “Well? Does that cover it? I think that covers it.”

“Yes,” said the program director, faintly, as the mech on his right mumbled over the components of the drivetrain, “yes, Ratchet, thank you. Your feedback is invaluable. Well done, Megatron, keep up the good work. Almost to your exams, aren’t you?”

“On which he’ll excel, I’m sure,” said Ratchet. “Come on, Megatron. Stop lollygagging. We haven’t got all day.”

Megatron allowed himself to be hauled out of the room, down the corridors to Ratchet’s office, and into the lab and examination room. When Ratchet let go of him, he crumpled like a drone with its battery removed and shook.

Ratchet thumped him on the shoulder. “Get it out of your system,” he said, not unkindly. “I’ll be in my office.”

Megatron waited for him to leave, then covered his face with his hands.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t his near-expulsion that terrified him, but the sound of Trepan’s needles *click-clicking* in and out of his fingertips.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Shameless robot smut.

After several months of studying, Megatron did well in the next round of exams.

Ratchet took them both out to dinner. He looked across the table at them over steeped fingers and frowned.

“I’m sure you two have a good idea of how much danger you’re in,” he said.

Megatron looked at him with an expression of confusion. Terminus looked down at the table.

“Which is to say, quite a bit of it,” Ratchet said after a moment. “And it’s only going to increase after you finish. You have a little time to study for your exams. Megatron, I expect to see you in my office *every* day. Terminus, whatever help he needs at home, give it to him.”

They both nodded this time.

“I think the next thing they’ll try to do is ensure that you don’t get a mentor for your apprenticeship. I’ll step back for a while, see if anyone else picks you up—not because I don’t want to mentor you, but because I want to make it clear you can do this on your own. If no one does, I will bring you as my apprentice to the Dead End clinic. It’s hard, unthankful work, but you’ll see a lot more there than you’ll ever see at the Iacon Medical Center. After that, you’ll be passed as a medic. They’ll probably want to do an extra verbal exam. We’ll prepare you for it. Either way, once you pass your upcoming exams, you’ll qualify as a technician. That’s better than nothing, and should support the two of you just fine.” He leaned back in his chair and looked at them. “That’s without accounting for whatever wrenches our friends will throw at us along the way. What those are is a very good question indeed. I’m not going to waste time guessing; either we’ll deal with them or we won’t.”

“I understand,” said Terminus. He looked Ratchet in the optics. “And thank you.”

“I wouldn’t have made it this far without you,” said Megatron.

“Oh, don’t be maudlin,” said Ratchet. “He’s my student. I did nothing out of the ordinary. Drink your energon.”

The two shared a conspiratorial grin, and did as they were told. Ratchet watched them, smiling. “Seriously kid. Enjoy this. You’ve earned every bit of it and then some.”

Megatron gave him a small, shy smile. “Thank you,” he said.

“Can we?” asked Terminus that night, and put a hand on Megatron’s hip. Megatron didn’t need to hear more, nodded hastily and locked the door. Things felt right in a way they hadn’t before. He’d

done well in his exams. They might have a future. And the initial awkwardness was gone. He was comfortable enough in this now to know he wanted it.

Terminus guided him to the recharge slab, urged him to lie back against it. Bent and captured his lips in a long slow kiss, ran hands along his sides. Megatron returned the gesture with enthusiasm, kissed back hard. He felt his fans spin up, frame vibrate with excitement. Finally. There had always been something in the way before, shyness, lessons, shift schedules.

Terminus pulled himself up after him, sat with his back to the wall and Megatron facing him, his legs hooked around Terminus's back, Terminus's arms steadying him. Terminus leaned in for another kiss, harsher, more demanding, and Megatron rubbed the insides of his treads as he responded, enjoying the hitch in Terminus's ventilations. One of Terminus's hands dipped down to his hip, fingers and thumb rubbing slow circles. Terminus's pelvis twitched, canted against his, bringing their panels into contact. Megatron gasped, his grip tightening, as the movement sent white-hot arousal through him from interface to spark. Terminus ground leisurely against him, one long roll of the hips.

"Valve or spike?"

Megatron gasped. "I...I don't have a preference."

Terminus's fingers dipped into the wiring of his hip and toyed with it. Megatron leaned his helm on Terminus's shoulder and panted. He tried to bring his own hand to touch Terminus's panel but didn't have the mind to do much with it.

"Just relax," said Terminus. "I'll be happy if you're happy."

Megatron managed a nod. Terminus's hand slid around to his front and started playing with the edges of his panel.

It was a matter of moments before he opened it. Terminus smiled a little, circling the head of his spike before moving down to his valve. He dipped in between the folds, gathering the lubricant already seeping out, ran his finger back and forth over Megatron's entrance. Megatron whimpered, the sensation nothing like being penetrated, frustrating and promising. The pad of Terminus's finger flicked over his anterior node, a quick, light touch, and he drew in a quick, light vent.

"Don't worry about being noisy," said Terminus, grinning. "Your neighbors have been rude enough; it's about time you got revenge on them."

That made Megatron breathe a laugh, one quickly lost in a high pitched noise as Terminus turned his full attention to his anterior node. He found himself thrusting into Terminus's touch, tempted to take his own spike in hand—but at the same time, he wanted only what Terminus was giving him.

"Go on," said Terminus, deciding the matter for him. "Touch yourself."

Megatron carefully wrapped a hand around his spike as he usually did when self-servicing, feeling oddly shy under Terminus's gaze. He began to move, slowly, then faster as need overtook him and he fell back into familiar patterns. He opened his mouth to pant, looking down at himself and Terminus's fingers over his node, and Terminus brought his other arm around, pressed a finger under Megatron's chin, bringing his face up and kissing him again. His glossa pushed into Megatron's mouth, gentle but insistent, and at the same time he slid a finger into Megatron's valve.

Megatron clung to him, pressed his face into Terminus's shoulder as Terminus broke the kiss. His hand stilled on his own spike; he'd never felt so sensitive before, as if every node registered the

single finger.

Terminus slid in and out, gentle, slow, added a finger. Megatron moaned, arm tightening on Terminus's shoulders. He was getting impatient. He thrust forward into the touch with a needy sound.

Terminus chuckled. His fingers moved in Megatron's valve, spreading. Megatron grunted. It felt good, but still not enough. He was used to being pressed down over a berth and fragged. This was nice, but enough teasing!

Another finger. It was closer to what he wanted, but the unstimulated deep nodes in his valve ached, unsatisfied. Megatron bucked his hips again, prompting another laugh. Terminus's thumb rubbed over his anterior node with quick, light movements.

The overload hit him without warning. He panted, his abdomen and hand suddenly coated with transfluid. Terminus's fingers seemed very big in his suddenly sensitive valve, and it was a relief when they withdrew. He dropped his hand from his spike, braced himself on the berth so he wouldn't collapse on Terminus, who was biting possessively at his neck cables, a sharp stab of pain that sent heat into his valve.

"Up a little," said Terminus, when Megatron's shaking stopped, and Megatron with an effort shifted to kneel over him, hands braced on the wall to either side of Terminus's helm. Terminus leaned up, kissed him, his panels clicking aside.

Megatron tried to look down at him, but his own chestplates got in the way. He could feel Terminus though, the blunt nudge at the edge of his valve. Terminus reached down around Megatron and took his spike in hand, stroked it. His other hand grasped Megatron's hip, guiding him a little to one side. "There," he said. "Now back down." His hand tightened on Megatron's hip as Megatron pushed down. "Slowly now."

Megatron glared at him. "Slagging tease."

"Someone has to teach you patience. Slowly, dearspark." The hand guided him down, agonizingly slowly. Up a little as the head of Terminus's spike met resistance. Megatron growled, cut short as Terminus kissed him again. "Patience. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm not made of crystal," Megatron said, but the little rocking thrusts of Terminus's spike at the edge of his valve made it hard to think, each one pushing further in. Finally, the whole head was inside him, and he made a low noise of satisfaction and sank down on it before Terminus could halt him, reveling in the way his partner's optics flared and his mouth fell open.

Terminus panted, and Megatron grinned, a grin which turned into a startled gasp as both of Terminus's hands clamped around his hips, holding him in place. Terminus shivered, obviously mastering himself, then circled his hips slowly. He lifted, Megatron moved with him, delighting in the scrape of a spike over sensors, but it seemed he'd hardly moved a handspan before Terminus halted him.

"What are you *doing*?" he hissed. "Frag me already!"

Terminus cocked an eyebrow at him, then thrust up. Megatron's hands clenched against the wall, opening and closing as Terminus guided him up and down, his spike thrusting hard into Megatron's valve, short, sharp movements that drove the breath from his vents.

"One more overload," said Terminus, panting. "One more overload and then—then, if you still

have the strength, that is—then we do it your way.”

“Age before beauty?” said Megatron, which made Terminus laugh.

“You sound like Ratchet.”

Terminus’s movements sped. It seemed he finally was finding it difficult to contain himself. Megatron leaned his helm against Terminus’s and offlined his optics, losing himself in the sensation. Terminus pulled almost all the way out, then back in, Megatron moving down to meet him. Megatron could feel his overload approaching, the sharper edge of pleasure, and stilled, not wanting to approach it too fast. Terminus stroked his helm. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Close,” Megatron said between gritted dentae. “Just...so close.”

Terminus slowed for a few thrusts, kissed him, long and slow. Megatron shook, on the very edge. Then Terminus moved, fast and hard, and Megatron’s optics snapped back online, mouth opening in a strangled cry, as he tipped over. He felt Terminus overload in him, a hot charge crackling over his nodes, and heard him make a small click as his vocalizer reset.

They stayed like that for some time, Megatron’s arms around Terminus’s shoulders, before Megatron gave into his strained mechanisms and slowly lowered himself onto Terminus’s spike, letting out a long vent as it stretched him wide. “My turn?” he whispered, though he felt tired and shaky. “In a moment, though.”

Terminus nodded against him and leaned up for a kiss.

Megatron leaned against his chest after that, enjoying the feeling of Terminus in him. Little flickers of charge flitted through him with every shift of his weight, and the stretch, the reminder of their closeness, made him let out a little shivery ventilation.

After a long time simply leaning against each other, Megatron rose up on his knees, bracing himself again on the wall. Terminus reached for his waist, lightly resting his hands there. Megatron smiled down at him, and began to move, slowly at first, then, as his charge began to climb, he sped up. He’d loved riding Impactor, could bring him to overload multiple times before his one, and though Terminus seemed altogether more patient, he was quite sure that Terminus would be no different.

Sure enough, Terminus shuddered and stiffened in a second overload before Megatron had finished, and leaned back against the wall, optics half-powered, watching him. “A little faster,” he said, after a time, and Megatron happily obliged.

He reached his peak soon after, slumped against Terminus again, who stroked his helm and back, murmuring praise. It was some time before they disengaged, Megatron looking ruefully down at the quantity of fluids that left his frame. “Good thing the washracks are next door,” he said.

Terminus laughed a little as well, and tossed him a cloth.

Chapter 17

The next few months were utterly blissful. Megatron didn't have any classes; he was expected to be studying. It translated to far more time together. Terminus delighted in spending as much of that time as possible fragging Megatron into a happy strutless heap. And while Megatron had had an active interface life in the past, it was rather limited. Most miners didn't have mouths; no one had bothered to design them with mouths, and so oral pleasure was largely a password-locked datapad to Megatron. Neither had he done much with his diagnostic port, the sensitive secondary structure that sat dorsal to the valve. Originally intended to allow a medic to take internal diagnostics of cold-constructed mecha, it had been rendered obsolete by upgrades in medical scanners, and retained largely for its, ah, *recreational* benefits. And the fact that the factories hadn't bothered to change the molds, which likely would have cost them extra.

Besides, even Forged mecha were frequently retrofitted with them now; they'd been smoothly integrated into standard Cybertronian design. Megatron had never used his, a sensible precaution in the mines—it did not produce lubrication and was not self-cleaning as a valve was. Grit, once introduced, was difficult to get out, at least, without a proper washracks at one's disposal. Terminus knew *that* from his adventurous youth, but Megatron, when younger, had not been adventurous.

But Megatron was an incredible frag, and after centuries of nothing more than frantic couplings in dark corners, eager to learn. His previous partners had certainly taught him some things, but nothing particularly creative. Megatron, they'd both found, *liked* creative. A lot. And could keep going for more or less forever.

Terminus smiled a little to himself as he worked, looking forward to returning home that evening. Even when they weren't fragging, the company was nice, Megatron leaned up against him and muttering through structures. The exams were a handful of days away, but he was confident for the first time—Ratchet, bless the evil glitch's spark, had been driving Megatron through simulation after simulation of the exams, and Megatron's scores had been steadily climbing. He was ready. And if he failed, Ratchet said, there were options. Terminus believed him. With a patron like that, he doubted they were going to end up on the street.

But he doubted Megatron would fail. Ratchet had said his brain itself was restructuring around the damage, learning to convey signals in new ways the more he practiced. He might come at some things sideways, Ratchet said, but he'd get there and that was what was important. The amount of 'sideways' amused Terminus—there were some bits of information Megatron recalled by moving his fingers in certain ways, tapping parts of the wall in their room, and so on.

"He's good at spatial awareness," Ratchet said. "And reasoning. Frag, he'd probably be one Pit of a dancer, or a fighter, if he got the training. He'd be terrifying in the air, if he had the right alt-mode; he is very aware of everything around him, and he tracks things in motion extremely well. Even if he's not looking at them. So, we're attaching bits of information to objects. Having him build a room for the information within his processor. It seems to be working very well."

He agreed with Ratchet, and privately was appalled at the mech's suggestion that Megatron might have been better suited with a flight mode. Who dared to say things like that? Ratchet had to be very well-protected indeed. He even had a mate, and he wasn't scared?

But his methods worked. Megatron wandered around the room, muttering things, and then, when he'd internalized the material, sat on the berth and muttered things as he wandered around a mental version of the room, and Terminus started to hope.

Trepan was outraged by his reports. He loved that. He felt like he finally had the upper hand, and Trepan didn't, and every time Trepan tried to press him further he could just say, "I can't let Ratchet or Megatron get suspicious," and Trepan would relent. Trepan had the hunted look of a mech losing support, and it delighted Terminus no end. Add to that Ratchet's adjustments of his prosthetics, and he'd not been happier for at least a century. There was no more aches, no more swelling, no more blistered metal.

Ratchet, for all his privileged position, wasn't so bad after all.

Terminus hummed a little, finishing tidying up a lab, then stepped into the corridor. Put his materials away, and he could go back to the habsuite and Megatron. If Megatron was feeling up to it, he had a few ideas for how to spend the evening.

Trepan reset his vocalizer just behind Terminus, and Terminus flinched.

"Back into the classroom," said Trepan, silkily. He looked smug again. Terminus felt the energon in his tank curdle. Enjoying Trepan's discomfort in no way meant he wasn't still scared of the mech.

He shuffled back into the lab classroom he'd just finished cleaning, put his cleaning supplies down, and looked at Trepan.

"You've given us a bit of a breakthrough," said Trepan. "Unintentionally. But really, Terminus. A maintenance 'bot fragging a medic? How indecent."

Terminus's spark plummeted. He looked down. There was nothing for him to say.

"Of course, we did tell you to get close to him, so perhaps you took that a little *too* much to spark," said Trepan. "But you do know, if he passes his exams, you can't stay with him. You can't bring him down like that. Primus! The gossip alone would keep him from ever finding an apprenticeship, let alone receiving an appointment. No, Terminus. If he passes his exams, you will have to say goodbye to him."

"Is that a threat?" He shouldn't have said it, he knew as soon as the words left his vocalizer, but he didn't care.

"It's a statement of fact, Terminus. If Megatron becomes a medic, you can't keep on like this. You see why the system *is* the system. It's certainly natural for two of similar frametypes and experience to find such affection for each other. In the mines, it would be *admirable*. Two bots of equal stature, *true equals in every way*, sharing such a profound bond. In private, of course. But now that Megatron has excelled, outpaced you, there's no way that society would accept your perfectly natural love." He shrugged a little. "But if Megatron fails, well, you two could return. Together. Why, I'd help you with all the recognitions of *conjunx endura*, if you two chose that path. All the legalities and so on. There are such a lot of them, if you want it properly done."

Terminus gaped at him. Outrage made the lights on his helm flicker briefly.

"Very generous of me, after all," said Trepan, looking down at his fingers. He slid his needles out and examined them. "Very generous indeed. It's taken you by surprise. But we *know* you've done your best." He glanced briefly at Terminus, whose optics had been caught by the needles.

Terminus reset his vocalizer, trying to tamp down his fear.

He'd once thought that, given a choice between sabotaging Megatron and losing their relationship, he'd do the former. But now, with Megatron so close, he couldn't. Taking this chance away from

Megatron, when Megatron was a breath away from becoming the first miner to become a medic, would be as good as killing him, in spark if not in frame.

He couldn't do that to the mech he loved.

Even if it meant returning to the mines.

He couldn't take his optics off the needles.

Would Trepan *dare* shadowplay him, here, now, if he refused? He wanted to tell the little mech to frag off. He wanted to tell him exactly what he thought. He wasn't sure he dared to.

But he wouldn't *cooperate*.

He fell back on the lesson he'd learned all these months ago—when Trepan asked something, lie.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you. Proper recognition—I'll do everything I can, sir. I promise."

"Of course you do, Terminus." Trepan smiled, likely at his fear, and slid the needles away, grinning more broadly at the way the tension went out of Terminus's shoulders. "You are so very cooperative now you've ben readjusted. We'll get you proper legs soon, too. You'll do everything you can. Of course we can't ask more than that, can we? And really, my condolences. I didn't realize you and he might have romantic interests. It was cruel to single one of you out and leave the other behind."

"Thank you," said Terminus. "Thank you. I couldn't bear being parted from him."

He better have sounded like he meant it. He *did* mean it. But Megatron succeeding was worth his broken spark.

One thing was certain, however. Terminus waited until Trepan was gone to even think it, as if the mnemosurgeon could read his thoughts across the room.

Megatron couldn't know about this. Not until after the exams. No matter how they dragged him away, he couldn't let Megatron be distracted. Megatron would be sparkbroken, too, but Terminus had told him long ago, in a conversation Trepan had taken from him, that he must be resigned to becoming a figurehead. This wasn't the way in which it was supposed to happen; he would be a medic saving sparks rather than a revolutionary inspiring them. But he would be a figurehead, and figureheads had to make sacrifices.

It bothered him not at all that he was making the decision to make this sacrifice without Megatron's permission or input.

Some things were more important than individuals.

Chapter 18

He passed.

Megatron held his diploma in trembling servos. Ratchet thumped him on the shoulder. “Fraggit, kid,” he said. “With your scores? I think I’ll just take you on anyway. No performative waiting around for someone else to snap you up; I don’t want to risk it. Now, you’ll wind up living and working in the Dead End. Are you willing to do that?”

Megatron looked up at him, delighted. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I am. It’s what I’d prefer, actually. I didn’t put myself through—,”

“—Pit,” Ratchet supplied helpfully.

“I didn’t put myself through the Pit just to treat mecha who’d be taken care of anyway. I want to make a *difference*.”

Ratchet thumped him affectionately again, even though he had to reach up quite a lot to do it. “Well. Looks like we’ve got a real revolutionary here. Perfect. All that spirit’s going to get beaten out of you by the third week, believe me, but it’s the thought that counts. And your ability to stick to it when you realize you can’t fix everyone. But seeing what you’ve done here, sticking to it won’t be a problem at all.” He glanced around, said low and fast, “You know I don’t like compliments, kid, but I’m genuinely proud of you. Enjoy this. You’ve earned it and then some.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Megatron, rather stunned.

“Ratchet will do, Megatron,” said Ratchet. “You’re technically my junior colleague now. No needing to keep calling me ‘sir’ every time I turn around. Come on, have some jellied energon, and make sure to slip a bit of it into your subspace for your friend. He deserves this as much as you do, no matter what the function-check at the gate says.”

They both glanced over at the temporary fence erected around the university green, and the clerical bot there. The function-check was new. No manual labor class allowed in. Megatron had had a bad moment trying to get in to his own party.

“Primus, I hope he’s not right about those fragging things getting more frequent,” said Ratchet under his breath. “Anyway. Go stuff yourself, Megatron. It’s your party.” Another thump and he drifted away, leaving Megatron standing in the center of the crowd.

Megatron made his way over to the buffet, collecting a glass of enegex and a selection of dainties. He felt guilty about the dainties. He remembered enough time he’d spent underfueled that the waste of energon in processing these was totally unacceptable.

“So you’re Ratchet’s pet,” said a sneering voice next to him, and he looked down to find a flyer with the broken cross of a medic on each wing at his elbow, looking at him as if he were something unpleasant that had fallen off someone’s foot.

His intakes dried. “Sir, I don’t think I’ve had the honor...”

“You haven’t,” said the jet. “I’m Pharma. Your esteemed mentor’s mate.” There was a subtle emphasis on *mate*. “Frag, you’re every bit as unpleasant up close, aren’t you. Well, it seems he is really as much of a good teacher as I remember, getting *you* though training. Primus alone knows what possessed him to take such a risk.”

Megatron inclined his helm a little. “I am unendingly grateful to Ratchet and his efforts,” he said. “He is certainly the reason I am standing here today.”

Pharma smirked. “At least you admit it.”

“Yes.” They looked at each other. Megatron had a brief impulse to ask after First Aid, but restrained himself. After a moment, Pharma huffed an irritated vent and stalked away. Megatron waited another minute before subspacing his plate and downing the rest of his enegex. He’d lost his taste for celebrating. All he wanted was his little habsuite and the comfort of the mech he very much hoped would become *his* mate.

He intended to ask Terminus if he wanted to undergo the rites when he returned home.

Terminus paced. He would be saying goodbye to Megatron today. If he was lucky. He was a little surprised Trepan hadn’t come to collect him already.

He’d been rehearsing what he would say for months now, muttering it under his breath to check that he actually *could* say it, that Trepan’s meddling wouldn’t stop it in his vocalizer. He mastered himself, sat with his hands in his lap and waited, helm bowed, for Megatron to return.

His spark was coming to pieces within him, he was sure of it. He felt the hot prickle of optic cleanser at the corners of his optics, and tilted his head back to direct it back into its channels. The mines, without Megatron, seemed an unimaginable hell. But he couldn’t let Megatron see that. He couldn’t let Megatron know how he felt, because then the stupid, soft-sparked fool would want to follow him, and he was sure Trepan would let him. No. This was his to bear alone if he wanted to create that wonderful new world that he and Megatron had dreamed of, and he was not dashing those hopes now. Megatron was a more powerful rallying point than he had ever been before. Megatron could not be allowed to falter.

He had no choice. So he offlined all the cleanser protocols to his optics. Buried his pain as deeply as he could, and wondered how much longer Trepan would give him.

The sound of the lock on the door disengaging. He straightened and looked at it. He felt brittle. He hoped for the strength not to shatter for just a little longer.

It was Megatron. He let out a quick huff of relief, rose to greet him. Took Megatron’s hands in his own shaking ones, and leaned his helm against the younger mech’s.

“Are you all right?” Megatron asked softly, alarm in his voice. “Has something happened?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Terminus.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know how long we have,” Terminus said. “I need you to listen to me very carefully.” He placed his hands on Megatron’s shoulders. “We talked about this before. You won’t remember it, and I can’t remind you save for this; whatever happens next, you *must* keep doing this. You *must* remain a medic. You can’t bow now, you can’t take it back, and if I leave, if I am *forced* to leave, go back, anything, you *cannot* follow me. You can’t live for yourself anymore, Megatron. I told you, long ago, that you have to be at peace with being—” the word *figurehead* would not come, could not come, not with Trepan’s meddling, and Megatron was looking at him with confusion and fear both, and Terminus hardened his spark, “You’ll have to be at peace with being a symbol to

others. Someone who isn't hobbled by sentiment. Megatron, promise me you'll do this."

"Terminus..." Megatron's shoulders shook under his hands. "What's going on? What happened?"

Terminus looked away. The words wouldn't come. They were too horrible, and he already knew Megatron's response. He'd be frightened for him. He'd worry about his legs. His age, his state of repair. He'd fear that Terminus would die before they saw each other again.

"Terminus, you're scaring me." Flat and honest and open. He didn't like hearing Megatron that way. He looked back at his lover, the mech who was all but a mate to him.

"Trepan means to send me back to the mines," he said. "It'll be all right, Megatron. I managed for a long time before you came along, and I need you here more than," his vocalizer glitched on the thing he wasn't quite sure was a lie, "I need you here more than I need you with me. I need you to give us hope." He was amazed he'd been allowed to say that last thing.

A knock on their door. He flinched. Only one thing that could be.

"Don't resist them, Megatron. Don't give them an excuse," he said.

Another knock. Megatron looked at the door with very real fear in his optics. Terminus's hands clenched on his shoulders. "Megatron. Megatron. Look at me, now. What is your name?"

Megatron obeyed. "Megatron," he said softly.

"Yes. And where are you from?"

"I'm from Tarn."

Terminus let out a vent he wasn't aware of holding. Trepan had left that, at least. "Good."

From outside, the sounds of the lock being overridden.

"Remember that," he said, hearing the edge of his own fear. "If nothing else, Megatron, *remember that.*"

The door opened, and Trepan stepped into the room. He hadn't bothered to hide his anger, and the two mecha on either side of him moved past him to take Terminus by the shoulders.

"You're ten minutes late," he said coldly.

Terminus dropped his gaze immediately. Long instinct. "I'm sorry, sir, I just wanted to say goodbye."

Trepan snorted. "Of course. Come along."

Terminus tangled his fingers with Megatron's, one last tight grasp. It would have to do instead of a kiss. He dared say no more. Only, "Be happy, Megatron. Don't wait for me."

After all, he didn't think Trepan would ever let them see each other again.

Trepan smirked at Megatron. "Congratulations on your success, Megatron. I hope it's worth everything you've been through. Come on, Terminus, your transport won't wait all day."

They left Megatron standing there in his room, seeming very small and bereft, and Terminus went with Trepan's thugs, not looking back. He wasn't sure if that was for his sake or Megatron's.

Act II

Six Months Later

Orion Pax frowned at the building in front of him. He didn't want to go in. But duty called.

He had two Enforcers with him, but they wouldn't do a whole lot of good against Overlord's people. They were vastly outnumbered, to start with; he also had no idea what Overlord might have on them. Last time he'd gone in to question Overlord, his entire team had quailed. Conjunx enduræ, friends, livelihoods, when it came to blackmail, Overlord was endlessly inventive. He wondered sourly if Overlord might have done very wonderful things if he hadn't turned his mind to crime.

He looked up at the building Overlord had made his headquarters, and vented heavily. "All right," he said. "Either of you wants to back out now, I won't judge. But if you come in with me, we're seeing it through to the end. A mech is dead. We owe it to him to find out who was responsible. No matter who it is. Am I understood?"

Prowl and Tumbler looked at each other. They were from outside his district; he'd requested them specifically because of that, and their reputations.

"Yes sir," said Tumbler.

Orion stepped forward and pushed open the door.

"We're here to see Overlord," he told the mech who loomed out of the dimness at them.

"And just who do you think you are?"

"Orion Pax, Enforcer. Either show us to him or step aside."

He stepped aside. Orion let out a small vent of relief. One hurdle passed. Of course, it didn't mean much. Overlord was always one step ahead of everyone. Once, just *once*, Orion wanted to see him at a disadvantage, to *admit* to something. One day, that fragger would go down, and Orion just hoped it would happen legally.

They turned, heading up the hall toward the central room of the building, what Overlord called his office. It looked like a throne room, a wide space before a single chair.

Overlord reclined on the chair, a lazy grin flicking across his generous lips. "Orion Pax. Such a pleasure! You're here about the murder, I'm sure."

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't have anything to do with it. In fact, I'm quite upset. I've got some of my people keeping an optic out; I'll be sure to let you know if anything shows up. One of the laborers on the docks, wasn't he? Pity. Such easy targets. Perhaps he annoyed the wrong person in power, and didn't even know it."

"Perhaps," said Orion stiffly. The mech hadn't just been a dockworker; he'd participated in pit fights to a small extent. Somehow he'd ended up fighting Overlord. Overlord had spared him two days before his body had shown up. "Still, procedure must be observed."

“Of course, officer.” Overlord smirked more. “How can I help you? Of course, I do want a little from you in return. Nothing illegal. Information only. Inquiring minds want to know.”

“What, exactly?” Orion’s optics narrowed.

“Your friend Ratchet. He’s got a new assistant. Any idea who he is?”

“I have not spoken to Ratchet in some time.”

“How remiss. Really, Orion. Keep better track of your friends. He’s a very remarkable assistant. He looks like a miner. Medic colors, though. Seems he might be serving out an apprenticeship.”

“It seems you know more of him than I do, Overlord.”

Overlord waved a hand. “I suppose so. It was worth a try. Count it as a favor; it sounds like your friend Ratchet is getting political, a very dangerous sort of activity these days. You get the sanitized version, Orion. I’m the one who deals with the Senate’s victims when they inevitably turn up down here.”

“Yes, I’m sure you are.” Distraction. It was always distraction with Overlord. What seemed like freely given information, designed to throw you off the scent. “But the dockworker. He was last seen alive when fighting you.”

Overlord laughed a little. “Oh yes. Poor thing. He was out of his class and he knew it. You do know I spared him, don’t you? Only a few thousand mecha saw it.”

Orion nodded. “I know that. I don’t know what happened after.”

Overlord fixed his full attention on him, and he stared back, refusing to be intimidated.

“I offered him employment,” said Overlord softly. “He accepted. Then he vanished. I know you fancy we have a little rivalry going, Orion, but this is absurd. I don’t know anything more than that, and continuing to ask is...unwise.”

Orion felt himself smile grimly behind his mask. “Of course. I will contact you if I have any... further questions.”

Overlord nodded, before his optics went to the mecha with Orion. “Prowl and Tumbler. A little outside your jurisdiction?”

“We are assisting Orion Pax with this investigation,” said Prowl stiffly.

Overlord laughed softly. “I see. Clever, Pax. Very clever.”

Orion nodded at him and turned his back, not venting properly until they were out on the street and well away from Overlord.

He didn’t speak until they were back in the police station, in one of the soundproofed rooms.

“That was not particularly productive,” said Prowl, his doorwings hiked with disapproval. “I’d prefer to stay until we’d solved this case.”

“It was more productive than usual,” said Orion. “He offered Rout employment, he said as much. Not *what* he offered Rout employment *as*, however. We’re never going to have enough evidence to really prove this, but rumor has it that Overlord likes to keep his defeated opponents as berthmates after sparing their lives. None of the survivors will confirm it, and some end up dead, like Rout.”

“As you’ve said,” said Prowl. “His comments would fit with that, too. But there’s no way to prove it. We tried everything short of going in and asking him first, and we’ve now tried that.”

“And look where it got us,” said Tumbler. “Primus, Orion, why do you *stay* here? Iacon could use you.”

“I’m needed more here.” That was the end of it. He’d be the one thing Overlord couldn’t chase out of the city. Never mind that Overlord hadn’t particularly *tried*. It was like he found Orion funny, and let him be.

“Almost a month, and we have to return tomorrow,” grumbled Tumbler. “It’s like someone doesn’t want us to solve this case.”

Orion remained silent. He was fairly sure someone didn’t. Overlord had friends in high places.

It was in a sour mood that he returned home. His apartment was a bare little space, largely unadorned. He crossed to the datastation, after drawing his evening energon, and settled himself there, thinking.

After a time, he began to write.

Megatron of Tarn had never resumed his work. He was, it seemed, gone. Along with all the other missing persons reports he dealt with, Orion had opened a private report. Not on any datapad; within his own brain.

It wasn’t a chore maintaining it; it was empty.

He’d stepped into Megatron’s place as best he could, though he used a penname. *Optimus*. He liked it; it was close to optimism, and as he hoped to inspire faith in a better future, it fit. He wrote about the situation in the Dead End, about starvation and corruption and what happened to mecha too hopped up on circuit speeders to move. He wrote about the unfairness of relegating mecha here based on their alt modes, of the potential he saw in others dismissed by society. About how this kept everyone in their separate little groups, unable to ally. About how cooperation was the only hope for freedom. He’d begun doing political research; he proposed ways of effecting political change.

One day they would find him, he knew, as they’d found Megatron, but the false name and the web of digital misdirection he’d set up might buy him some time. For now, though, someone needed to speak out. He’d be a poor protector of the people if he remained silent now.

“Working late at the clinic, I see,” said Pharma. The snide tone of his voice made Ratchet sigh and pinch the bridge of his nose.

“Pharma, I have an apprentice. He needs the time, and since the medical academy conveniently neglected to find any rotations he could take there, it’s the clinic or nothing. Besides, it’s good practice for him. Real, not the coddled, carefully selected cases at the academy.”

Pharma bristled. “First Aid is doing perfectly fine, and he’s not being coddled.”

Ratchet raised his hands defensively. “Fine. First Aid’s a good kid. He’ll learn, and you’re doing a

great job with him. But I need to look after Megatron; I'm his mentor."

There was the root of the problem. The twist of Pharma's mouth became even more sour. "You didn't have to take him on for the apprenticeship."

He could hear this argument in his sleep, he'd heard it so many times. He sighed again. "He's a good student," he said.

Pharma sneered. "He's not and you know it."

"He's a good student," Ratchet repeated, hearing anger in his own voice. "He deserves a chance, Pharma. I just don't understand your insistence on never giving him one!"

"He's a miner. He should stay where he was sparked."

"If you're going to talk that way, why the frag did you marry me?" Ratchet spat, stung beyond bearing. "Dammit, Pharma, you know how I feel about that!"

"Maybe I changed my mind after seeing him up close! Maybe I changed my mind because all our colleagues think you're fragging him! How do you think that makes me feel, knowing I've been upstaged by a *miner*!"

"I'm not fragging him," said Ratchet. "Why would I do something like that?"

"There's no other explanation!"

"He's a good student, Pharma!"

"Listen to yourself!" Pharma's voice cracked. "He's a good student. That's all you say! Well, maybe I'm sick of being in danger because you decided this mech was the second coming of Primus. He's dangerous. He's stupid. He's ugly. And everyone thinks you're fragging him! They're laughing at me!"

"Then they're idiots," snapped Ratchet. "Pharma, if I listened every time people gossiped about me, if I took it to spark, I wouldn't have gotten out of medical school."

Pharma slapped him.

Ratchet reeled back against the bookshelf. It felt hard enough to dent; he was amazed to find smooth metal under his fingers when he raised a shaking hand to it. He looked up at Pharma, suddenly lost for words. Pharma was bigger than him. He'd always liked that. Now, it occurred to him for the first time that the difference in size was worrying.

Optic cleanser welled up in Pharma's optics. He took a step back, then two, and fled the room, leaving Ratchet to slide to the floor, staring at his hands.

Chapter 20

Ratchet went back to the clinic that night. There was a second cot in his office. It seemed better than sharing a room with Pharma. He just needed to make sure Megatron didn't ask awkward questions.

However, when he walked in the door, Megatron displayed a brilliant grasp of good timing by looking at him blearily from where he had been sorting the newly autoclaved instruments, saying, "Ratchet? I'm glad you're back, I don't think I feel well," and keeling over at his pedes.

Ratchet thanked every god and Prime he didn't believe in as he hauled a groggily protesting Megatron semi-upright and dragged him to the examination room they used for infectious patients. This meant he didn't have to *think*. It did mean he had to deal with Megatron trying to catch the big pretty polka dots his optical suite was insisting existed, and he already knew the mech's temperature was far above what it should be from the heat coming off his armor, but at least he wasn't asking questions.

"Megatron," he said after a moment, "leave the polka dots alone." Typical that the mech would only admit to being sick when he was currently delirious. He really needed to work on instilling a sense of self-preservation in the mech. He did a scan. "Yep. You're sick as Pit. And I think I know with what. Fortunately, the visual symptoms are going to go away once it reaches your gyroscopic subprocessor. Unfortunately, that means you're going to start purging everywhere." He sighed. "Why didn't you tell me that you hadn't had all your vaccinations?"

Megatron turned his helm and managed to focus on him. "I have been vaccinated," he managed, which impressed Ratchet. Someone with the processor ache of an early-stage adaptivirus shouldn't be able to do that without substantial effort. "When I came online."

"Yeah, well, you've got a protoform's virus, probably from that bot we patched up this morning. Bet they gave you substandard vaccinations. No. Stay there. Believe me, your room will thank me in the morning." Megatron's optics had slid out of focus again. "Aand we're back to the polka dots. You poor fragger." He patted Megatron's shoulder. He'd already had this, and it wasn't something you got twice.

"You'll be down for about a week," he said, mostly to himself. "Not purging the whole time, thank Primus, but you'll be dizzy and it'll clog up your vents. And you'll *itch*. There's only so much drugging you to the optics will do; you'll just have to put up with it." He reached to put a sympathetic hand on Megatron's forehelm, and Megatron startled him by letting out a little high-pitched noise and curling into a ball on his side, optics wide and white with terror.

"Frag," he said, pinching his nasal ridge and afraid to touch Megatron again for fear of making it worse. "I'm sorry kid." He took a step back and Megatron didn't uncurl. "I'm just gonna stay over here until you relax, okay? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." Mentally, he kicked himself. He'd guessed enough about Megatron's past to know better. "No one's gonna touch your processor, it's okay. Settle back down, just focus on getting better."

Very, very slowly, Megatron's optics returned to their normal color. Ratchet stayed on the other side of the room until he'd begun to uncurl from his panicked huddle, almost an hour. Then he carefully, and loudly, filled a container with coolant, put a straw in it (one of the curly ones, for protoforms; he found that his adult patients loved them just as much, if not more, and was sure that there were few such luxuries in Megatron's life to date) and offered it to Megatron. "I think you're going to want this."

He was ready to catch it but Megatron managed surprisingly well, draining the container quickly. It was just going to come right up again afterward, but dry heaves were very unpleasant. Better he have at least something to bring up. Ratchet met his optics. "Again, I'm sorry. I should have known better."

"I just don't like it," said Megatron quietly. "I'm not sure why."

Ratchet took the container again. "More coolant?"

Megatron nodded. He finished half the next container and then went back to trying to catch polka dots. Ratchet made sure he had a bucket, that the berth was low enough he could reach said bucket, and went to get the necessary drugs and programs to make the next few hours at least a little less unpleasant.

This was something Megatron could handle here; their patient this morning hadn't needed to be hospitalized. But he didn't want Megatron left alone. He could manage, but he had enough enemies Ratchet felt uneasy leaving him on his own in the clinic while very sick. Besides, it was about time someone looked after the poor mech. He still hadn't recovered from Terminus's disappearance.

Ratchet couldn't say he was surprised about Terminus vanishing. He wished he could. He closed his optics and sighed. Poor Megatron. He didn't deserve any of this.

A retching noise from the other room brought him back to the issue at hand. Right. Violently ill intern. Ratchet hoped he'd hit the bucket, but he wasn't about to hold his vents.

It was later.

Massive discomfort had happened. Now Megatron lay curled on his side with an insulating blanket over him, aching. He remembered faintly the delirium and general misery, and vividly all the purging he'd just done. His tank ached. He hadn't known it could do that. The light hurt his optics. He squeezed them shut, even though Ratchet had darkened the room. The little bit of light that crept past the doorjamb was more than he could face.

He shivered. The blanket helped, but it wasn't enough. Several dozen blankets wouldn't have done it, he was sure. He didn't think he could be warm again. Ratchet had promised him a hot solvent shower once he finished dealing with the first patients of the day. He was looking forward to it.

He hated to admit it, but the physical misery was almost a relief. It was easier to deal with than missing Terminus, and Ratchet was fussing over him. He hurt too much to have his pride offended, and could admit that it was very nice to be fussed over, to be uncomfortable and have someone acknowledge it and care for him. To feel like he didn't have to push through it.

He stifled a groan. He hadn't felt like he needed to purge in hours, but if the pain in his helm got any worse, that might be sufficient to start it again. And something on his leg had started to itch.

He stamped back the wistful memories of Terminus looking after him, before the accident, when he'd come down with one of the illnesses that plagued the mines. Too many people in tight spaces, diseases spread easily. He remembered a gentle hand smoothing over his helm, when such a gesture hadn't frightened him so badly. A friendly voice.

He coughed, coming back to reality, a fevered, aching frame and no Terminus. He let out a little moan of discomfort and burrowed his face in against the berth padding. There wasn't much to stay

awake for.

He groaned quietly again, and, with his usual determination, set about falling asleep again.

Ratchet left Megatron to sleep it off while he scrubbed himself and the room and opened up the clinic for the day. He'd run it for years on his own, and doing it now wasn't much of a problem.

He didn't want to think.

Every time he stopped moving, his cheek seemed to ache more. His spark hurt, too. Every time he stopped moving, it was a fight not to curl up into a ball and stay there, which was ridiculous because it wasn't like he'd been seriously injured.

The door chime sounded. Ratchet went out to get it, and found Orion Pax standing uneasily on his stoop. "Fragged off Overlord again, did you?" he asked.

"Not exactly," said Orion, stepping inside. "But he did make a remark about your new assistant."

"Frag," said Ratchet.

Orion waited for the door to close behind him. "May I speak with him?"

"No, he's asleep. Finally." Ratchet frowned at Orion. "He's been ill. An adaptivirus."

"I'm inoculated," said Orion.

Ratchet folded his arms. "Why so intent on seeing him?"

"I thought..." Orion looked faintly shamefaced. "I'm looking for a miner," he said at last. "One that vanished a little over a year ago. I'm wondering if he matches."

Ratchet gave him a long, narrow-opticked glare. "Are you now," he said. "Megatron's been through enough, Orion. No matter what you find, leave it be. He can't afford any more scrutiny."

He saw the way Orion startled, optics wide, and cursed inwardly. He'd given too much away, he knew it. Of *what*, he wasn't sure.

"Megatron," said Orion. "Are you *sure* that's his name?"

"He's sure that's his name." Ratchet pinched the bridge of his nasal ridge. "Orion, what do you think you're doing?"

"I never told you about Megatron of Tarn, did I?" said Orion softly. "Or his writings."

Tarnian corruption of Megaton, Ratchet remembered. *You know how they like to stick 'r's where they don't belong.*

"Oh," he said out loud, and sat down. "That explains...rather a lot."

Orion sat down across from him. "So it is him," he said, optics bright. He was probably smiling under that faceplate. "Ratchet, you have no idea how important this is. I thought he might be dead."

“Hold it right there,” snapped Ratchet. “No. Don’t tell me anything. *NO.*” Orion stopped mid ventilation and stared at him. “No, Orion. Do not tell me anything more. Don’t say anything more, and for frag’s sake, don’t act like you’ve figured it out. You are *not* going in to meet him, do you understand me?”

Orion stared at him, obviously hurt and alarmed.

“The last two people who became friends with him had bad things happen. One sent back to the mines. One, I’m fairly sure, shadowplayed. Shockwave’s looking out for us so far but let’s not make assumptions. Someone has it out for that mech, and if I know why, it will make things worse. And if you start encouraging him to go back to his old ways, we’re all going to be fragged. Him particularly. They’ll kill him, Orion. Or come up with something they think is worse. Empurata? Even worse shadowplay—someone did a *butcher* job on his brain—reprogramming? I don’t want to find out. So no. I want you nowhere near him, for your safety and his.”

Orion still stared at him.

“Also he just finished purging his tank out,” said Ratchet.

“Ratchet,” said Orion, quietly, “Overlord is interested in him. I just finished fishing the corpse of the last mech Overlord fancied out of a smelting pit.”

Ratchet’s plating clamped tight. He looked away.

“You be careful too,” said Orion.

“Yeah,” said Ratchet, his voice rough. “Yeah, I will.”

Chapter 21

It wasn't the conversation with Orion that brought the dreadful suspicion alive in Ratchet's brain. It was the way Pharma welcomed him home.

"Ratchet?" The other medic looked up at him from the couch, hands clasped together, everything about him drooping. "Oh, thank Primus you're okay. I was worried sick."

Ratchet looked at him, both glad Pharma didn't seem angry, and nervous—what if his mood changed? He must have suspected where Ratchet had spent the last day.

"I'm sorry. I know that doesn't even begin to cover it. I don't know what came over me." Pharma didn't stand up, deliberately kept himself small—what they were trained to do around a frightened patient. He looked up at Ratchet. "I'm just... I'm sorry, Ratchet. I lost my temper. I was so scared for you, and you weren't listening."

The trickle of guilt in Ratchet's spark rose. He'd spent much of the last day and a half wondering what had happened, why this had happened, what he had done. It seemed it was the same as usual.

Pharma was looking at him, searching for acknowledgement.

"I lost my temper," he repeated, and he did stand up, pressed a cube of flavored energon into Ratchet's nerveless hands. "Please, Ratchet. I'm more sorry than you can imagine. I don't know what came over me."

I don't know what came over me. Oh Primus. No.

The realization settled in his tank like a solid ball of lead.

Pharma had been shadowplayed.

Orion sat and stared at the wall.

Megatron was here.

Megatron was *alive*.

And Ratchet was protecting him.

This much hope *hurt*. Orion's optics tilted in a smile.

There was something to work toward, and one of these days, he *would* meet Megatron, face to face, and...say whatever he could to make things better. But for now, he turned back to his work with renewed vigor. There was something worth fighting for.

And he was sure that one day, Megatron would be happy to learn someone had taken up his mantle.

One day, he would get to meet him.

Help him.

He laughed a little at himself at that, knowing he was already more than half in love with a mech he'd never met. But those *words*. It was the very first time he understood just how powerful words could be. Megatron through words alone had taken his spark in his hands, filled it with an iron belief, an iron *hope*, new and bright and unbreakable. It had *changed* him. Determination, commitment, an ideal to follow even if it were by himself, in the dark—for hadn't Megatron, too, formed this in the dark?

He thought about all the stories of poets selling their sparks to Unicron to gain fame. Was that an easy bargain to make at the bottom of a mine? Orion did not believe in such things. But he thought about the dedication it would take to put those words down, knowing every one might kill the writer. So many accidents might happen in a mine. A will as iron as the hope he inspired. Such a bargain, a commitment, held more weight in Orion's mind than any deal with a deity.

He wanted to let Megatron know he was recognized. Supported. That he had allies, and that he was valued. Whatever might have been done to him, there were still people who valued him.

He wondered what he would look like.

He opened his datastation and began to write. Knowing Megatron was still alive, even if it was a close secret, inspired him as never before.

He did not recharge that night.

Megatron agitated to get back to work as soon as he could. Ratchet lost his temper and threatened to strap him to his berth for the first day. It turned out he didn't need to. Megatron tried to stand anyway and abruptly found himself on his knees, clutching the berth to keep from toppling all the way over.

"You have no sense," Ratchet told him, helping him up with little apparent effort. Megatron had always known medics were built sturdy for their size, but he was still impressed as Ratchet loaded him back onto the berth with equal ease. He decided not to get into a fight with any medics—as much as he disliked Pharma. He'd overheard a few of his conversations with Ratchet over the medical clinic transmitters, and didn't like the tone he took with Ratchet.

In the meantime, he was bored. There was nothing to do but read. It wasn't like he disliked reading, but there were far more interesting things going on outside the recovery room. He wanted to help. Before this, he'd never spent a day out sick from work in his life; he'd had to power through it in the mines, even if all he could do was lean on the drill and pray it wouldn't hit a pocket of rock or gas that would cause it to skip or make an explosion.

And he wanted his routine back.

He liked the routine of life at the clinic. There was always work to do, always something to do to occupy his hands and let him think. Ratchet was kind. Irascible, but kind. And that mattered a lot.

He was always teaching, too. Megatron had learned more here than he had in the first year of his training. Another thing: here, he knew he was making a difference.

He remembered his conversations with First Aid, the horrors they'd imagined. This was definitely worse. He'd already seen things that no one would believe, that even he couldn't have believed before coming here. But he was doing something about them, and that made it bearable.

It took a day for the shivering and itching to abate, three for the cough to become bearable. Finally, Ratchet watched him stand and wobble across the room.

“One more day,” he said. “Then you can wash some of the glassware. Primus knows it needs it.”

“Thank you.” He curled back up in the berth. Ratchet handed him new datapads and scanned him.

“You have an excellent self-repair system,” he commented. “Not a trace of virus in your systems; all your discomfort is your self-repair attacking things inappropriately. Take it slow today. No sneaking out when you shouldn’t.”

Megatron nodded and behaved himself.

Ratchet made good on his promise to allow him to do some work. At first, early in the morning, this was excellent. He could be out and about and listen to Ratchet dealing with his patients. But some of their patients were what First Aid would have called real creeps.

“Well aren’t you a sight for sore optics.”

Megatron glanced behind him. “If you need a repair, go see Ratchet. I’m busy.” Normally he wouldn’t have been so brusque with a potential patient, but something about this mech made his plating stand on end. Something about the tone of voice, or the way the mech—the *very big mech*—stood in the door just gave him the surges. Ratchet was attending someone else in another room. Suddenly, Megatron *really* wanted to call him.

Soft laughter. “I’m not looking for repairs. I’m looking for you.” Rapid footsteps crossed the floor, and Megatron fought the urge to flinch at the sense of filled space at his back. A hand settled on his shoulder, turned him bodily. A finger lifted his chin. “This isn’t some crass colony, my dear. With a face and frame like yours, you don’t *have* to work. Especially not in a crude hovel such as this.”

Tamping the revulsion and panic down, Megatron stood where he was, refusing to flinch, glaring at the larger mech. Big. Blue, with detailing picked out in the color of congealed energon. “And if I *want* to work?” he said icily.

The generous lips curled into a smile. “Perhaps you could allow me to persuade you otherwise. I’d be very happy to. Think of what you could do with a little extra on the side.”

“Unhand me,” said Megatron. The other mech hesitated a few moments, a silent challenge Megatron refused to take. Then he let go.

“As for your offer, I have no need or desire for it,” said Megatron, and turned his attention back to the glassware. “That is my final decision. Respect it.”

The mech laughed. “My name is Overlord, little medic. Remember it. It may be of use to you.”

In response, Megatron pulled the plug on the basin, losing whatever Overlord said next in the gurgle of solvents. He finished rinsing the load of glassware before he turned around.

Overlord had gone.

Megatron stared at the doorway, profoundly disturbed. The urge to punch something, even if it wasn’t those smug faceplates, refused to abate. It took a moment before he realized his lips had skinned back from his dentae in a snarl.

Overlord. Ratchet had warned him about the mech. Megatron had never dreamed he'd see him in the clinic. Casual, like he *lived* here.

Megatron felt distinctly more unsettled about spending the night. He was going to check the locks very carefully.

Overlord was sulking around the place, and that was never a good sign. Ratchet dismissed his current patient, then, at Megatron walking very quickly into the room, alarm all but boiling off him looked up. "What is it? Are you done with the glassware? Go rest."

Megatron shook his head. "There's someone here," he said.

Ratchet's eyebrows went up and he followed. Only to find a smirking Overlord in the middle of the clinic. "Oh," he said. "Megatron. Go sort the autoclavable materials in the recovery room."

Megatron bobbed his helm and scrambled. Good kid. Smart kid.

"Overlord. What do you want?" Ratchet folded his arms and glared.

"Your little assistant," said Overlord, leaning close over Ratchet. "I want him. How much?"

"Funnily enough, he's not for sale," said Ratchet. Somehow, he managed to keep the disgust off his faceplates.

"Oh, come now, Doctor. He's a miner. Look at that frame. You can't expect me to believe that's a legitimate medic." The mech dirtied perfectly innocent words with his smirk.

"He's a legitimate medic. See for yourself." Ratchet pulled up Megatron's official ID.

Overlord looked.

"How peculiar," he said. "It seems you are correct." He straightened up. "I shall speak to him myself."

"He's my intern," said Ratchet coldly. "Don't try pressuring him to do *anything*, or I'll plant my foot so far up your aft you'll taste it for the next century. Am I clear?"

Overlord chuckled. "This is why I admire you, Doctor. Afraid of nothing."

"I *mean it*," snapped Ratchet.

Overlord made no response, but to turn away, still smirking, and walk out the door.

"Frag," said Ratchet.

"Good evening, Overlord."

Overlord smirked. "Ah, the little doctor. What may I do for you this evening, Trepan?"

Trepan smiled, sipped the glass of high grade he'd already poured himself, leaned against the table

in an extremely attractive way. Overlord looked him over appreciatively; he liked pretty things, and while Trepan wasn't exactly to his tastes, far be it from him to admire something nice when it sauntered up.

"Nothing that you wouldn't want to do on your own, I assure you," he said. "That new medic in Old Hatchet's clinic?"

"If you're about to tell me to keep my hands off him, I'll be sparkbroken," said Overlord. He raised his brows at the smaller mech. "You wouldn't do that to me, now would you? I promise not to break him too much. Not unless he's *troublesome*."

Trepan laughed, his usual quiet little laugh. "Oh, no. Not at all, Overlord. Not at all. Indeed, the best thing you could do for me is grab him out of that clinic and frag him senseless."

"What a treat," said Overlord, and meant it. "Has he done something to irritate those on high?"

"You might say as much," said Trepan. "This was supposed to make him go flat on his face. Alas, he seems more robust than that. Quite a problem. We're tired of it, to tell the truth."

Overlord's smile grew. "And I assume that simply disappearing the mech would be too obvious?"

"He must do it of his own volition," said Trepan. "They're trying to prove the inherent inability of miners to become medics."

"I don't like your masters yanking me around," said Overlord. "But, this time, there's certainly something I want in it. Very well. I'll go about proving the immorality of your defiant little medic. I certainly know how to get what I want."

"That's all we could ask," said Trepan. He finished the glass. "We'll waive the fee this month as a token of gratitude."

Overlord's brows went up further. "Hm. The little medic means that much, does he?"

"Not when you're done with him," said Trepan, and let himself out.

Chapter 22

It had been three days. The blow hadn't even left a dent, but Ratchet still felt the pressure of a phantom hand against his cheek.

Pharma seemed to think nothing had happened. He'd curled up on their berth with his back to Ratchet, wings twitching gently, while Ratchet lay next to him with those ten seconds playing behind his optics. The way Pharma had looked at him. The blow, the sound of his mate's hand cracking against his face. He found his fingers tracing the line of his cheek, forced them away from his face, and shuddered. Fear coiled deep in his tank.

Pharma would never hit him. He knew it. Never. That wasn't who Pharma was.

But there was an explanation. A simple one. Horrifyingly simple.

Shadowplay. Someone could have shadowplayed Pharma, a punishment for something Ratchet had done. To get at Megatron by eliminating his one protector. Or simple spite.

Ratchet slowly pulled the light out from his subspace. Primus. If Pharma ever found out, he'd be right to be angry. But he had to know.

It was simple to shadowplay a medic. No thick helm to go through, just an injection in the back of the neck, and done. Only one spot to check.

He clicked the UV light on, looked at the back of Pharma's neck.

Nothing.

He let out the long vent of relief he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

He'd been ready to run. But if this were just a display of temper, nothing more sinister than that, he could fix this. He could work this out. Between the two of them, things would be okay.

Megatron regained his feet and duties quickly after that.

About three weeks later, as Ratchet was preparing to leave and Megatron was tidying things away for the night, there was a knock at the door. Ratchet being closer went to answer it.

"Frag!" Ratchet paused half in, half out of the clinic door, jammed it open with a foot. "Megatron, cot here now. You'll have to transfer him. He's out of my size class."

Megatron was already in motion, collecting an anti-grav gurney and pushing past Ratchet. There was a mech on their doorstep, but a body was probably a more accurate way of putting it. Energon streaked down his frame, evidence of a savage beating. There seemed to be serious lacerations as well; someone had taken a blade to his frame. Stasis cuffs had left burns on his wrist plating.

His tank flopped sickly, but he moved the body onto the gurney as quickly and gently as he could, reactivated the anti-gravs.

Behind him, the patient file recorder chirped on.

“Tell me what you’re seeing,” said Ratchet, an order, and Megatron started talking as he pushed the gurney into the surgery.

“Heavy grounder, civilian frame with weapons modifications; typical enforcer caste. Unconscious, lacerations, burns, and denting. Lacerations largely to the dermal plating, most shorter than one meter. Dents extensive. We’ll have to check for internal injuries. Burns consistent with heavy-warframe grade stasis cuffs at their highest setting.” He stopped, turned on the scanning field, and while that ran, bent to better examine their patient. Quite a heavy grounder, he thought. There had been a plate over the nasal ridge and mouth; that had been cut away. The joints of the digits had had metal splinters shoved into them. Agonizing, not life threatening.

But a few of those cuts were. “I see at least four lacerations extending a decimeter or more into the protoform,” he said. “One optic cracked. Hopefully we won’t need to replace that.”

“We’d better not,” said Ratchet, already scrubbing in. “We’re out of the damn things.” He looked at the scan. “All right. Your turn. I’ll get to work.”

Megatron cleaned himself, keeping his vents even and calm. This wasn’t the first time. But it was horrifying. The extent of that deliberately inflicted damage unsettled him profoundly. Who the frag would do that, especially to an enforcer?

He glanced over his shoulder at the red and blue frame on the cot, concern stirring within him. Whoever it was, they were a threat.

And froze as a horrible thought came to him, a horrible memory of red optics and a smile that made his plating crawl. The pressure of a finger under his chin, forcing him to look up, a controlling gesture under a veneer of unwelcome intimacy.

Overlord, Ratchet had said. The mech who held all of the lives in the Dead End in the palm of his hand. The champion of the pit fights, and ruler of a criminal empire. Who *else* would dare attack an enforcer?

But why dump the mech here?

A dreadful suspicion settled in the bottom of his tank. He finished scrubbing in, turned to work.

“This wasn’t intended to kill him,” Ratchet was saying. “Rush job, too. Probably dragged him into a basement somewhere, not something more organized.”

“You see this often?” said Megatron, his voice steady as he lifted a small welder for the delicate work on the mech’s protoform.

“Once every few months,” said Ratchet. “Some stupid fragger crosses the wrong bots. That sort of thing.”

“Are they usually enforcers?” His hands were steady as he worked, despite the revulsion and fear roiling together through his frame.

“Not usually,” said Ratchet. “Not a good sign you-know-who is getting so bold. Not sure I like the door-to-door delivery, either.”

Megatron finished the weld, looked up at Ratchet, who met his optics without pausing in his work. “You think this might have to do with...”

“It’s just his style.” Ratchet gave him a crooked smile. “We’ve got protections, though. He knows

not to mess about with someone under my care—or our patron's.”

Megatron looked down at the still frame. “What about others?”

Ratchet said nothing. The dread settled harder.

“You’re under Senator Shockwave’s protection,” said Ratchet. “That counts for something, even around here. As long as you don’t tread on anyone’s stabilizers, you’ll be fine. We’ll just need someone to remind Overlord that you’re off limits.”

Megatron looked down. If Overlord was this bold, would a ‘reminder’ do anything? From what he’d seen so far, he sincerely doubted it.

He went to work on the mech’s optic, painstaking, fiddly work that occupied all of his processor. When he finished that, he found Ratchet had done the rest and was now examining the patient for further damage, swearing softly as he did. “You fragging idiot,” he was saying under his breath. “You fragging idiot, Orion, didn’t I *tell* you this would happen?”

Orion. The mech’s name was Orion, and Ratchet knew him. Megatron’s tank felt heavy with guilt and his hands shook. Finally it was done, and they put Orion in the CR tank. They stared at him a few moments. Megatron looked at Ratchet, who was shaking even harder than he was.

“You should go home,” he said. “Pharma will worry. I’ll keep an optic on him and make sure he’s out of it until you get back.”

“I’ll *stay*,” snapped Ratchet, and Megatron—greatly daring, unused to physical touch—reached out and took one of Ratchet’s hands in his own. It trembled in his, exhaustion or nerves he couldn’t tell.

“You can’t do anything with those,” he said softly. “You’re shaking too hard, Ratchet. You need to recharge, and I know you won’t do it here, not when you could be checking on him.”

Ratchet gave him a look of some surprise, which then, slowly, turned into a sort of weary resignation. “You’re getting too big for your armor,” he grumbled, then raised a hand. “I can get home on my own. Don’t you dare call anyone.”

Megatron stepped back with a forced smile, raising his hands. “I would not dream of it.”

Ratchet grumbled at him again, washed up in a distracted fashion, and headed out the door. Staggered, rather, and Megatron wondered a moment if he should have escorted him at least to the public transit system, the proposed new laws about alt mode neglect be damned. But he would have lost limbs, he was sure of it.

So instead he sat in the room and watched Orion where he floated in their sole CR tank. Perhaps he could feel virtuous about keeping an optic on him. They had been serious injuries. But in reality, he needed to collect his thoughts.

All those injuries had been done because of him.

Ratchet’s reaction left no doubt about it.

He looked at the mech, at the mess he was because of something he, Megatron, had refused to do, and his spark squirmed with guilt and horror and outrage. More so because that thing he’d refused to do was flatly unthinkable.

He didn’t know what to do.

Ratchet staggered in the door and found Pharma waiting for him with a hand on the control panel, smiling. It was the smile he'd reserved for Ratchet alone, after they'd first started dating, and it didn't fail to set his spark hammering now. He smiled too. This was rare enough he didn't want to question it. They could just enjoy each other's company, and try and forget what had happened earlier.

Primus, he needed this. The distraction. Pharma couldn't have picked a better time, and whatever he had to offer, even after having to have waited so long, Ratchet *needed*.

He tilted his face up for a kiss, and Pharma obliged—again, like the start of their relationship, wordless and wonderful and spark-stoppingly sweet. After the day he'd had, he needed it. Needed something to distract him from the sight of Orion with his armor sliced to ribbons and dented, mercifully unconscious. He kissed harder, and Pharma pushed him back against the locked door, a hand wandering down to his aft and squeezing.

Ratchet's legs parted, and Pharma pushed a knee between them, lifting his mouth from Ratchet's for a second.

"You sure you don't want me to clean up first?" he said, his voice grating on his own audials. "I'm not exactly—"

"Don't care," said Pharma, cupping his face and kissing him again. His other hand finished exploring Ratchet's aft and slid around his thigh to cup his panel from the front. Ratchet slid open immediately, and Pharma fluttered a finger against his node, a light stimulation that never failed to make Ratchet wet. He shivered, plating fanning, gasping into the kiss.

Pharma's hand slid down his cheek and to his arm, pinning his wrist against the door next to his head, before thrusting a digit deep inside of him. It bordered on too much, too soon, which was exactly the way Ratchet liked it. Slow and sweet? No fragging thanks. It gave him too much time to think, and Pharma knew that.

He must have known something about what had happened, Ratchet thought distantly. What else would have brought this on? But if he knew, if he was doing exactly what Ratchet needed—he wasn't going to complain.

They parted briefly. Ratchet glanced down—Pharma's spike was already out, hard, transfluid beading on the slit. He thought about taking Pharma in his mouth, and Pharma knew what he was thinking and smiled. "I'd much rather have your valve. Turn around."

Ratchet did, bracing himself against the door again, and Pharma took his wrists in a gentle but powerful grip and pinned them at the small of his back. Ratchet bit his glossa to keep from an even louder moan. He moaned anyway when Pharma slid into him. Every ridge of Pharma's spike seemed to rub against his sensors, and Ratchet pressed his helm to the door and whimpered.

Pharma fragged him hard, and there was no time for thought between the waves of pleasure. It was *exactly* what Ratchet needed.

But in the moments after overload, Orion's face floated before him again, optics dark, one cracked, the gouges in his armor, and Ratchet shuddered. He rocked back against Pharma even though his valve was oversensitive and aching, welcoming the twinge of discomfort.

Pharma laughed against his audial. "Really bad day, was it?" he said.

“Doesn’t even cover it,” said Ratchet. “Come on, let’s see if we can make it to the berth.” He looked with some annoyance at the transfluid stains on the door. It made Pharma laugh again, and kiss the side of his face, and release him.

They didn’t make it to the berth for a while. They made it barely six paces before he was on the floor and Pharma was above him, pushing into his secondary port and taking him like that. He wrapped his legs around Pharma’s waist and whimpered with every thrust, Pharma’s perfectly thick spike filling him perfectly. He said as much, which made Pharma laugh delightedly.

Ratchet smiled and sank into that laugh, so glad to hear Pharma sounding like himself. He wasn’t shadowplayed, he remembered, and the relief heightened his arousal, led him to clutch at Pharma’s pauldrons and move into the next thrust with a sound of delight. “I love you,” he said, and again, “I love you.”

For all the horror of the day, at least this was the way it should be.

Chapter 23

It was not a good morning.

Megatron checked the CR tank's levels again before stepping out to place the biohazards in their locked box for pickup. He had just locked it again when he heard the sounds of a fight—or, more accurately, a beating, around a corner.

He pinched his nasal ridge, a bad habit he'd acquired from Ratchet, and sighed heavily. He shouldn't get involved. But the mech in the CR tank decided him—if those fraggers were trying to do the same thing again, he was *not* having it. He made sure the clinic door was locked and strode in the direction of the noise, trying to make himself look as big and intimidating as he could, flaring his treads out from his body as far as he could.

"What exactly is going on here?" he demanded, rounding the corner. The two mecha doing the beating stepped back, startled, and he walked firmly toward them and the smaller white speedster curled in a ball on the ground. He had a few moments—he could see the confusion in their optics, and they actually backed away as he knelt next to their victim.

"It's all right. It's okay. You're safe now," he said to the smaller mech, who didn't uncurl, stared past him with wide optics and bared dentae. He looked back at the mecha responsible. "You two had better leave. Now."

"You two had better leave," mimicked one of them. "Oooh, I'm *so* scared. What are you going to do, little medic? Scold us?"

"You know who I am," he said, gambling. "And you know the parties interested in me."

The larger of the two laughed. "If you think the fact Overlord wants to get under your plating will let you stride around like you own the city, you're dead wrong. He doesn't like his toys getting *ideas*."

Megatron's tank roiled. Well, if he'd needed any confirmation, there it was. This *was* Overlord's doing after all. How many mecha did he plan to dump on the clinic stoop if Megatron refused to acquiesce? Anger stirred, ugly and powerful.

"You know, the 'face drone won't be missed. We should kill him, take the medic down a peg."

"Sounds just about right." The larger reached for him, some mockery of a caress. "Other methods of persuasion being forbidden."

Megatron let him get close enough, seized the proffered limb and threw the mech into the wall, panic and luck and Impactor's past lessons all working together. The mech made a satisfying crunch and fell; Megatron kicked him in the face and wrenched the captive arm in a direction the mech's designers hadn't intended it to go. Things went pop, including, by the yell, the main articulation.

"You cog-licking—" He spun, bashing the mech he held into the wall again, and only just ducked the blow aimed for him. It was a flat, open-handed slap. The second mech wasn't treating him like a real opponent, which given his actual combat experience, suited Megatron just fine.

He was pretty sure that taking on two far more experienced opponents without a weapon was a terrible idea, but there didn't seem to be much of a choice. He punched the other hard in the

abdominal plating, putting all his strength behind it. There, at least, his origins did him a favor; he was far more heavily armored than most medics might be, and he was built to steady a drill more than half of his weight. The other mech didn't expect it; he heard the air go out of his enemy's vents, one great surprised *whoof*. Megatron slammed another two blows into the same place and brought the doubled-over mech's face down into his knee. Something stirred behind him and he whirled on his downed opponent, who was struggling to his feet, a blade in his good hand.

Megatron stepped in close, fast, hooked a leg behind the other mech's knee and yanked him back to the ground, stomped the knife-wielding hand. "I don't *need* Overlord's protection," he said. "I protect myself, and anyone else I please to." He drew back for another kick.

Then the other one grabbed him from behind and lifted him off his pedes. Megatron roared, half in alarm, half out of pure rage that someone was getting between him and an enemy, and flailed.

It didn't have much of a result.

Frag.

He didn't remember much of Impactor's barfight advice, but he was fairly certain this was on the 'avoid this if at all possible' list. Because the mech he'd been fighting was back upright again and coming at him with an expression that suggested that Overlord or no Overlord, he was very interested in revenge. Megatron snarled insults and kept struggling. Whatever they did to him, he'd make sure they paid for it. He'd bite if he had to.

He waited until the oncoming mech was in range and slammed his head into the other helm, hard, ignoring the burst of pain. It didn't seem to do much, though, except get the other mech's energon on him. Revolting.

"You little—"

The mech holding him drew in a sudden, sharp vent as if surprised, as if he were about to speak. But instead of a threat, what he said was, "Erk," before his grasp abruptly loosened.

Megatron tumbled to the ground, looked behind him, to see the smaller mech standing there with a short, energon-smeared knife in one hand.

"Thank you," he said, and the mech gestured frantically at him, obviously a signal to run. He needed no further prompting, staggered to his pedes and took off, the other mech close behind him. Megatron heard him falter, paused to lift him. Easy, surprisingly so—he was indeed a speedster, and the light frame was nothing to Megatron's own.

"They're probably not bold enough to follow you much further," said the mech after a short time.

"Good," said Megatron. "I am not inclined to take chances, however. What's your name?"

"Drift," said the mech.

"Well, Drift, I'm taking you to Ratchet's clinic. You need far better medical care than I can give in an alley. Is that all right?"

"I can't pay."

"We wouldn't want you to in any case," he said. "Thank you. You most likely saved my spark."

Drift laughed, a short, sharp sound. "You most likely saved mine. We'll call it even."

Megatron smiled a little. “That works,” he said, and doubled back to the clinic, hoping there wouldn’t be any thugs waiting for them there.

Megatron was nowhere to be found when Ratchet returned that morning. He assumed the mech was dealing with the biohazards, and started the process of decanting Orion. After another fifteen minutes, he started to get uneasy.

Which was about the same time a bloodied and grinning Megatron came staggering in the door with a small speedster slung over his shoulders. Ratchet looked at him, at the speedster, at the dents and the energon and went, “*What.*”

The smile fell off Megatron’s face and he seemed to shrink. “I found Overlord’s thugs beating him up,” he said, abruptly serious. “I stopped them, but he still needs help.”

“You stopped them. With what, your face? Let me see that nasal ridge.”

“Nasal ridge?” Megatron raised a hand to it, frowning when it came away covered in energon. “I don’t remember that.”

“You headbutted that one,” said the speedster.

“Oh,” said Megatron, sounding surprised.

“Badly,” said Ratchet. “I’m resetting your nasal ridge. This is going to hurt like frag.”

He took more satisfaction than he should have in the resulting yelp. “Now go wash up. We’re decanting Orion in the next twenty minutes, and I’ll need your help because you’re the only one here who can lift the idiot. You, what’s your name, get on the slab and let me look at those dents.”

He might have been occupied with the work on the speedster’s dented chassis, but he sure as Pit didn’t miss the grin the two of them shared. Wonderful. Megatron had found a friend. A friend absolutely marinated in Syk, by the smell. He frowned down at the new patient. “You, what’s your name, anyway?”

“Drift,” said the patient, instantly cowed.

“You’re going to be here for a bit, Drift. First of all, we want to keep you away from those bastards who jumped you. Secondly, I don’t like the look of this dent.”

Drift was staring at him.

“What?”

“...usually medics just kick you out once they’ve stopped the bleeding.”

“Yeah well, Megatron’s a bad influence on me,” said Ratchet. “Hold still. It’ll take longer if you wiggle.”

Chapter 24

Orion came back online. It was certainly better than the last few times, particularly since the reason for onlining wasn't a bucket of cold filthy solvent in the face.

There was a medic peering down at him. A big one, unusually so—tank alt, his identification protocols offered. Another blink showed the by-now-familiar ceiling of Ratchet's clinic.

Orion ached. He'd had a very bad night. But he could still do his job, and his ventilations caught, because young medic with an unusual alt in Ratchet's clinic *had to be* Megatron of Tarn.

This would be so much easier if Megatron didn't look like he expected Orion to spring up and bite him. He pushed himself up on an elbow and tried a tentative smile. "Hello. I take it I have you and Ratchet to thank for my continued functioning?"

Megatron *blushed*. His faceplates heated to a visible degree. Orion found himself smiling, realized with no small dismay that his faceplate hadn't been replaced, and covered his mouth with a hand.

"Sorry," said Megatron. "Ratchet's working on that bit now."

Orion forced himself to lower the hand, because it made him look like an idiot, and tried the smile again. He asked the obvious question, the one he was already pretty sure he knew the answer to.

"What's your name?"

Megatron hesitated a long moment, looking down at his hands. Orion didn't like the pause, didn't like the way the other mech held himself.

"Megatron," was the response at last, with a sidelong glance at Orion.

"Megatron? Megatron of Tarn?" The question was out before he could stop it. Megatron flinched, something like fear passing over his faceplate, and Orion hastily added, "Don't worry, I don't—his writings are fascinating, I wouldn't ask in a professional capacity."

"I'm sure he would appreciate that," said the medic softly. "I'm sorry to disappoint. There's no connection; you know how all the good names are taken."

Orion smiled. "I know," he said. "Sorry for presuming."

After another moment, he asked, "So, Megatron, would you care to meet me for a cube tomorrow evening?"

He did not expect the medic to snort with explosive amusement. "If you're feeling that much better, I'll just get Ratchet in to take a look at you."

Orion himself was of a different mind about that—he was an idiot for asking, and he'd just as much rather blame a helm injury for the impulse. Because from Megatron's point of view, he was a total stranger.

Primus. Yes. A head injury. That was what he'd tell Ratchet. Ratchet wouldn't let him live it down.

It didn't take long for Ratchet to arrive, looking far too amused for Orion's peace of mind. "Couldn't even wait until you got out of berth, huh?" he said. "Lie right back down, you idiot. What the frag happened?"

“Some of Overlord’s thugs,” said Orion. “I still don’t know what happened, not really.”

“I told you to stay away from Megatron,” Ratchet grumbled. “Lemme see that optic. Megatron’s handiwork, by the way. Good hands, despite...”

“Despite being a miner.”

Ratchet looked briefly disturbed, then nodded. “Yeah.”

Orion lay back and submitted to his scrutiny. “I suppose Overlord really didn’t appreciate my investigation.”

Ratchet made a noncommittal noise.

“You don’t think so.”

Ratchet lowered the tool he was holding and glared. “You’re not stupid, Orion. Stop acting like it. You *know* Overlord’s got friends in high places. Haven’t you ever figured they might ask things of him?”

Optimus thought about that. It didn’t make sense. Megatron had lost his memory, lost his writings. He was contained, threat nullified. Why would he still be all that important?

Unless...

...unless someone had found out about his own writings.

“I don’t like that expression,” said Ratchet. “That’s the expression you get before doing something *really* slagging stupid.”

He forced himself to smile. “I promise I will not do anything *really* slagging stupid. May I have my faceplate back?”

“Here, all ready to go,” said Ratchet, and palmed it onto his face as if he were trying to slap Orion. Orion’s optics watered both with surprise, and with the establishing connections. He tried retracting it and deploying it a few times, noting the lack of a bump between his previous mask’s connections and the new metal, then really smiled. “You must have been up all night to do this.”

“Several nights. Megatron helped. Maybe you should thank him and not stare at his aft. I thought they taught you *manners*.”

“I did thank him.”

“And then hit on him, which nullifies it completely.”

“I blame the processor injury.”

“Fat chance.”

"Helm injury."

"Nice try, but no."

Orion sighed. “I am sorry,” he said. “His writings are inspirational, hopeful. I have the greatest possible admiration for him. I was impulsive and foolish.”

Ratchet snorted. “Now you’re being melodramatic. And before you get any notions about him—he’s not the same mech who wrote those.” He met Orion’s optics. “The Functionists made sure of that. He’s lucky he’s still got hands. He’s lucky he’s still got a fragging face. I’m not sure how much longer they’re going to let him keep them. His best bet is to keep his helm down and keep quiet. And if you’ve been up to anything revolutionary, you’re not going to make him happy, you’ll just hurt him worse than he’s already hurt—and he’s hurt pretty fragging bad, Orion. It’s a fragging miracle he’s not a gibbering terrified mess.” He glared at Orion. “I’d hope your little ordeal would have shown you as much.”

Orion looked away. He wasn’t sure if Ratchet had found out about his writing, or if this were all about Megatron. He wasn’t sure it mattered. “I understand. Is optic contact allowed, or do I need to stare at my pedes every time he’s in the room?”

Ratchet rolled his optics. “Don’t be an idiot. Be civil. Don’t try to get under his armor, don’t try to drag him into any of your adventures. He needs protection, not corruption.” He gave Orion a very significant look.

Orion raised his hands defensively. “All right. All right. I’ll be good.”

For Megatron’s sake, he supposed he meant it.

Megatron reset his vocalizer as loudly as he could. “Drift. What are you doing.”

The small mech scrambled guiltily to his feet, optics very wide as he stared at Megatron. “Um. I got lost on my way to the washracks?”

Megatron put his hands on his hips. “You’re supposed to be in bed,” he said. “You’re still recovering from getting the slag beaten out of you. Stop eavesdropping and *shoo*.”

“I’m fine,” said Drift, staggering a little. “I can walk.”

“Not my definition of fine, not Ratchet’s definition of fine,” said Megatron. “*Berth*, Drift. That sort of scarring does build up if you don’t take the time to let it heal, and I know that from experience.” He thought briefly about how stiffly Terminus always moved, about the protoform-deep scarring hidden under his own abdominal plating. “Trust me.”

Drift snorted, but accepted his arm to limp back to his berth. “You’re really big for a medic,” he said.

“I was a miner,” said Megatron, the plating on his back shifting uneasily at the look Drift was giving him, both intent and wondering, and oddly frightened.

“Huh,” said Drift, allowing himself to be helped onto the berth with only the barest of flinches.

“What were they talking about?” asked Megatron. Drift’s optics slid away from him, and the little mech looked abruptly cornered.

“Drift,” said Megatron, reproving. He had a terrible feeling that the overheard conversation had been about him, and he definitely didn’t like the feeling, and Drift keeping it from him annoyed him further.

Drift gave him a look of genuine surprise. “You sound exactly like him when you scold,” he said.

"You even pick up his accent."

Megatron raised an eyebrow.

"Now you look like him, too," said Drift.

"Now you're changing the subject," said Megatron.

"Fine," said Drift. "They were talking about you. Ratchet was telling the cop to stay away from you, because it was dangerous for both of you. Happy?"

"Hardly. Don't listen at doors. It's bad manners."

"You really sound like him," muttered Drift. "What the Pit's up with the two of you? You fragging?"

"Of course not. We both--he has a mate." Megatron watched Drift deflate at that and was privately amused. Ratchet might grumble about being an old scrappile, but he wasn't unattractive. Someone ought to hit Pharma upside the helm with that fact. Stupid mech.

He was really beginning to hate Pharma, with the way Ratchet drooped when he answered a call from him, the tight, unhappy set of his mouth most mornings. Ratchet deserved better.

"So," said Drift slowly, "do you make it a habit to go around rescuing paybots? You're not too great a fighter yourself, you know."

Megatron looked away, disjointed memories speeding across his processor. Being in the same position as Drift, down and kicked in the abdomen. Someone doing something to his head, pain and forced stillness and horrible, horrible helplessness. "I've been there too," he said, without spending a breath longer to question it.

Drift was looking at him very thoughtfully. "You know you saved my life," he said.

"Did I?" said Megatron. "What had you done that merited being beaten to death?"

"Oh, they wouldn't have killed me there," said Drift. "That would have been much, much later. You see, Overlord had just expanded his territory. I didn't know it. So I was working on his territory, and couldn't pay the fee."

"Fee," said Megatron, blankly.

"Yeah. He keeps it pretty nice, all things considered. You know, the rich mecha who like to slum it can come down and pretend to be all rough and tough, pay someone for the night, that sort of thing. And be reasonably confident they won't get their throats slit or anything. Reasoning is, there's better pickings in his territory, and he's gotta keep it that way, so he wants people to pay him if they take advantage of it." Drift wasn't looking at him, just talking, obviously angry at his own words. "So you gotta pay to work there. Only, no one walks around here with 200 shanix on them. If you can't pay, you have to work off the debt. He'll set you up with a place to work, energon, all those things. You just have to take his customers and give all your earnings to him until the debt's paid off. Funny thing is, it usually gets bigger under those arrangements." Drift shrugged. "At least you won't starve. It's not profitable. He may let someone pay extra to kill you, if that's what they want, but you won't starve."

"And if you refuse?" said Megatron.

“Yeah you don’t really get to refuse,” said Drift. “They beat you up until you quit struggling and take you in anyway. A debt’s a debt.”

“Primus,” said Megatron, aware of how completely revolted he sounded. “And he’s gotten away with this?”

“Who’s going to stop him? Orion tries, and look what happened to him. I think the only reason he’s still online is that Overlord thinks his attempts to arrest him are cute. He’ll get tired of it eventually, of course.”

Megatron looked down. “And what happens if Overlord ever has his optic on someone, and that someone isn’t interested in him?”

“Doesn’t turn out well for that someone,” Drift looked at him intently. “Doesn’t matter what that someone does; he’ll get what he wants, eventually.”

Megatron shuddered. “Wonderful. Just...wonderful.”

“That’s why they didn’t really want to fight you,” said Drift. “That makes sense. He’d be pretty sore about someone marking up his new favorite. You could say he doesn’t share well.”

Megatron felt anger bubbling at the back of his intake. “I see,” he said. “And that’s enough from you. Lie back down and let everything continue knitting back together. I’ll bring you some fuel in an hour or so.”

Drift did, but only with a very thoughtful look that Megatron did not like at all.

In retrospect, he should have known better than to go outside the clinic again, and he realized this at the same time that someone seized him from behind and shoved a shock prod against the back of his neck, making his limbs seize up. He collapsed to the ground, unable to move properly, and someone laughed before several pairs of hands picked him up. Someone put an inhibitor claw on the back of his neck that knocked out his optical suite. After a while, when his legs would obey him again, they put him on his feet and made him walk. A little time after that, they let him see again. Just in time to be shoved to a stop in front of Overlord.

“Well, my little medic, I am *impressed*,” said Overlord. “Fought two of my best and you’re still standing here without a dent. Poor Turmoil has three sliced cables, did you know that? Much higher and it would have gotten his spark. And it’ll be a year at least before Dreadnought regains his roguishly good looks. You really do know where to hit a mech where it hurts.” He stepped in close, forcing Megatron to look up at him. “I admire that.”

“I warned them to back off,” said Megatron, meeting his optics steadily. His spark beat hard in the back of his intake, remembering Drift’s words. “They were the ones who decided to keep harassing my patient.”

“Your patient,” said Overlord. “You mean the paybot? My dear, do you know how many of *him* there are in this city? Are you appointing yourself their guardian?” He patted Megatron’s cheek, and it was only with the very greatest restraint that Megatron kept from attacking him. It wouldn’t do any good, it would make him look weak and threatened. Better to pretend it didn’t matter, that he didn’t even see it as a threat.

His hands clenched all the same.

“That’ll keep you *very* busy, on top of your other duties.” Overlord’s smile widened. The fragger knew just how angry the gesture had made him, and was enjoying it. “I so look forward to watching you try.”

“What do you want, Overlord?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Appraising optics swept over him. “I just want to get to know you a little better. Is that so bad? You’re the one who’s being unreasonable.”

“Is this your idea of courting?” Megatron eyed Overlord in turn, and managed to simply sneer, rather than show the vehement disgust he actually felt. “You do realize that the point is to ascertain the other mech’s consent, not threaten him into your berth.”

Overlord laughed, but there was an edge to it. Then he leaned forward to murmur into Megatron’s audial, “Do you think I care about *that*? All it matters is what it looks like on the outside...and what it’ll look like is that *you* came to *me*.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Megatron.

“Yes, we will.” Overlord lingered there a moment longer than he needed to, then withdrew. “Oh, and a word of advice? Don’t speak about this to anyone else. We wouldn’t want anything *unfortunate* to happen to that clinic of yours, now would we?”

Megatron raised an optic ridge. “And you think our patron would look kindly on that?”

Overlord grinned. “The balance of power changes. You already have enough enemies, little medic. Don’t make me one of them as well.” He waved a hand at the mecha behind Megatron. “Take him back. Let him have time to think.”

Chapter 25

Among the many, many things Ratchet did not need that morning was a trussed Megatron dropped at the back door.

Rather than being scared, like a sane mech, Megatron just looked torqued off beyond belief. He growled a curse once everything was back online and untied, shook out his hands, and stalked past Ratchet into the clinic.

“The frag happened?” said Ratchet.

“*Guess,*” snarled Megatron.

“Overlord.”

“Yes.” Megatron turned and looked down at him. “I’m putting everyone here in danger,” he said. “I’m putting them all in danger, but acquiescing to Overlord is completely out of the question.”

“I agree entirely,” said Ratchet. “I’m not letting that slagger have you, and that’s final. You okay, kid? You hurt in any way?”

“Just my pride,” said Megatron, and shook his helm. “I will be washing the CR tube, if you need me.”

Hard, exhausting, and not anywhere near delicate work. Prefect. Ratchet nodded. “Just don’t scrub holes in it, kid.” He watched Megatron’s retreating back and made up his mind. He was horrible at this sort of thing but he had to try. He caught up to the other mech, put a hand on his arm and pulled him into the room.

“Kid. I know you feel bad about both of them. But you’re worth it, all right? And it’s not your fault. Who you are and what you’re doing matters. Don’t you dare fragging throw it away out of guilt.”

Megatron looked down at him with surprise. “Thank you,” he said after a moment. “It means a great deal.”

Ratchet gave him a small tight smile. “Don’t quote me. You’ll ruin my reputation.”

Megatron also smiled a little and reached out to carefully pat Ratchet’s shoulder. “It’s safe with me, I assure you.”

It would have been touching, reflected Megatron, if he were in fact in any way inclined to sacrifice himself. He wasn’t. He felt a faint twinge of guilt that Ratchet expected that to be his first instinct, because his real first instinct was to fight. To remove the obstacle, not bow to it.

No. *Never* bow to it. Megatron thought back to the long years of medical school, the petty cruelties, the all-encompassing fear, and swore to himself never to let that happen again. He’d seen things here that had been beyond imagining then.

He wasn’t the same. He’d learned a new sort of strength when they’d taken Terminus, an armor

around his spark. There was pain, but it didn't threaten to make him collapse, not anymore.

Overlord would regret this. He didn't know how, not yet, but he'd find a way.

Ratchet left in the evening. Orion heard the sounds of Megatron firmly shooing him out, back home and to his conjunx, and smiled under his repaired mask. Megatron seemed absolutely perfect as a balance to Ratchet, someone to look out for him and make sure he didn't injure himself with work, as he would otherwise.

Megatron stepped in to check on him later, brisk and professional. Orion assured him everything was fine. "And," he added, "I'm sorry for earlier. It was foolish of me. And presumptuous."

Megatron snorted, dropped what would have been a condescending pat on his helm from anyone else—it just strongly reminded Megatron of Ratchet—and went back to checking the various monitors. "It was a good barometer of your health," he said. "Let's leave it at that."

"Happily," said Orion. He frowned at Megatron's nasal ridge. "You've been in a fight, haven't you."

Megatron startled, and glared at him. Then jerked his head at the other room. "Found Overlord's thugs roughing up a patient," he said. "Is it true what he tells me about Overlord charging fees to work on his territory?"

"Yes," said Orion, sobering instantly. "It is. I wish we could do something about it, but Overlord —,"

"Has friends in all the right places. I know."

"I haven't even been able to find them most of the time when I've gone looking," said Orion. "And I have. I've executed more search warrants on that place than any other building in the city. There's *nothing*."

"Someone must warn them," said Megatron. "Well. That's that. You're as fine as you're going to be for the moment. Let me know if you need anything; I'm going to recharge."

Orion gave him another small smile. "That sounds like a good idea."

"Goodnight. Don't do anything stupid in my absence."

"I could say as much to you."

Megatron made a face, and left. Orion settled back on his berth with a sigh. Yes, the poor mech needed to be kept safe—he seemed to be a good and dedicated medic, willing to risk himself for his patients—but Orion wished he could pursue a relationship, friendship or otherwise, with the medic.

After a very brief time, he heard footsteps, then the door opening, and someone he assumed was another patient came carefully in, a very small white and red mech that he immediately identified as likely an addict, leaker, siphonist, and a hundred other unsavory things. His movements were quick and furtive, but he met Orion's optics squarely. "Hi."

Orion raised an optic ridge. "Hello. Aren't you concerned about Megatron catching you?"

"Not particularly, no. He's in the washracks. Only really wasteful thing he does, he can be in there

for *ages*.” The other mech sat down on the chair Ratchet usually used and stared at him. “So. What’s up with this place? And Megatron. Mostly Megatron.”

“I don’t think you’re asking the right person.”

The mech folded his arms. “You’re a cop, and you’re on good terms with Ratchet. So, you must know *something*. I overheard you talking.”

“And why has this piqued your interest?” asked Orion. “Forgive me for the assumption, but don’t you have more immediate things to worry about?”

“If there are a bunch of complete idiots right under Overlord’s nose, laughing at him and *still alive*, yeah, I’m interested,” said Drift. He folded his arms. “Especially if one of them is the one everyone saw save my sorry aft.”

“I see,” said Orion. Still, this seemed a little much just for self-preservation. “Ratchet and I are friends. I’m honestly none too sure of how he managed to stay here for so long.” Wiser not to name specific patrons, better to only imply it. “There may be someone from high up interested in making sure he succeeds.”

Drift nodded. “What I thought,” he said. He jerked his helm in the direction of the rest of the clinic. “And the miner?”

“He’s a medic now.”

“Yeah, well, I have *optics*,” said Drift. “Whatever he is now, he *was* a miner. And that sort of change doesn’t just happen.”

“Ratchet won’t tell me,” said Orion. “I’m puzzled too.” Puzzled, but he’d put most of it together, he thought. Telling a random street mech wouldn’t improve Megatron’s chances any, however.

“Humph,” said Drift, which sounded like Ratchet and made Orion stare at him. *Ratchet’s contagious*, he thought. *Only explanation for all of this*. A brief amusing vision of the four of them, all repainted to look like Ratchet, *harrumphing* at patients, crossed his processor, and he smiled behind his mask as Drift stalked away.

Observant. Orion wished he could recruit the mech. He did have an allowance for informants...

The next morning brought a new body on the clinic stoop. There was nothing to do for the mech, hadn’t been any intervention possible for hours. Ratchet cursed in a tired, defeated sort of way, and took it off to deal with it. The bright red “FAILURE TO PAY” scribbled across the chestplate made the mech’s former employment all too clear; obviously one of Drift’s compatriots who hadn’t heard about Overlord’s territory expansion, either.

Drift took one look and hid, shaking, in one of the supply closets, where Megatron found him when he went to fetch the mop. He said nothing past asking him to check on Orion. Drift could have been discharged that morning but Ratchet made not indication he was interested in doing so. Megatron had a good idea of why.

Once all the clean-up had been done, Megatron sat still, helm bent, and felt the anger bubble up in the back of his intake, slow and steady and acidic.

He couldn't remember being this angry before. It was cold, all encompassing, and at the same time it turned the world sharp and clean, courses of action clear, his thoughts as bright and delineated as he'd ever felt them. And still the anger came, filling his lines and cables and frame with power. Seductive, he thought. It made him feel powerful. As if he could do anything.

His servos clenched into fists on his knees.

He was *not* a toy.

He would never *be* a toy.

Overlord thought that by scaring him with *bodies* on his doorstep, he could force the matter, but Megatron was not the mech that Overlord thought him, not a pretty plaything.

The thought added roiling disgust to the mixture, the memory of a heavy, unwelcome hand on his shoulder, the press of a finger under his chin. Overlord *revolted* him. Overlord, who hadn't had anyone say no to him in so long that he simply did not hear it.

Overlord, whose bullies beat helpless addicts half to death. Overlord, who thought he had a right over every spark unfortunate enough to live within his reach.

No. Overlord had made a mistake.

Megatron bared his dentae in a silent snarl. Time to show him just how big a mistake he'd made.

An actual dead body on the clinic stoop. Pharma was going to blow a gasket if he found out. Ratchet sighed heavily, opening the door, closing it behind him. Pharma's usual acidity was coming back, comments here and there, a hard look, all those things.

Pharma was already there, staring at something on the table. Ratchet reset his vocalizer. "Hello," he said, neutrally.

"Ratchet," said Pharma softly, and turned. He was holding the UV light. "What is this?"

Chapter 26

Orion was asleep the next time Megatron went to check on him, deeply in recharge, vents rattling with snores. Megatron shook his head a little with amusement, and found Drift asleep as well, though he'd left the berth and had tucked himself into a corner, curled in a ball, several scalpels clutched in one hand. Maybe Ratchet would have taken them away, but Megatron was fairly sure he'd lose fingers if he tried. Drift was too nervous. If the scalpels made him feel safer, so be it.

He made his rounds of the doors, checking locks and security systems, before he went to his own recharge slab. He'd set it up in something more like a cupboard to a mech his size, just off the front atrium, where he'd be woken by any arrivals in the night. This was usually for patients, but these days, he found it comforting for entirely different reasons. He curled up (he had to curl up, to fit) and powered down.

He woke scarcely an hour later to a thump and a soft curse. He rolled to his feet, made his way out to the main room of the clinic, light in hand. "What do you think you're doing?" he said, the stern tone that had sent many a mech scrambling, and the beam of light fell on the miscreant.

Who glared at him through a cracked optic and broken nasal ridge. "Turn that stupid thing off."

Megatron did, reached for the lowest setting of the lights. "Ratchet? What happened?" He went to the shelves and pulled down the bandages and dent-puller Ratchet had been looking for, then went rummaging for a new optic lens. "Were you attacked on the way to the clinic?"

"I suppose you could say that." Ratchet made to reach for something else. Megatron shook his head.

"No. You sit down. I'll get something to mop that up with, and then I'll reset the nasal ridge. Optic will take a little more time."

"Wonderful, my apprentice is telling me what to do. How the mighty have fallen."

"Sit," snapped Megatron, then added, "sir." Attacked on the way to the clinic, his aft. Ratchet was acting all wrong for that. He should be at home with Pharma, who was also a doctor, fussing over him. He had no reason to be back here.

Unless something had happened with Pharma.

"This is going to hurt," he said aloud, moving over to Ratchet. Ratchet glared at him still more.

"I think what I taught you to say was *this is going to hurt like frag*."

"Mmm. Hold still." He held Ratchet's helm steady with one hand and reset the nasal ridge with the other, noting with sympathy the gasp of pain and the involuntary twitch. "How does that feel?"

"It hurts like frag," said Ratchet, acidly.

"Mmm." Megatron moved his hand down to Ratchet's shoulder and looked him in the optics. "If I ask you what happened, are you going to lie to me?"

Ratchet looked away. "Probably."

Megatron huffed a short vent and straightened up. "Very well. I won't ask. I'll clear off one of the

cots in the back.”

“You are *not* treating me like a patient—,”

“Yes, I am, because I’m sleeping in your usual berth,” said Megatron, “and I’m in no mood to give it up, and there’s not enough room for two.”

Ratchet looked like he was going to yell back. Then his optics slid past Megatron and widened.

Megatron turned. There, in the door, stood Drift and Orion, both staring at Ratchet with alarm.

“Get out,” he snapped.

Orion ignored him. “Old friend, what happened?”

Ratchet’s shoulders hunched and he looked down at his hands. Orion took a step forward, obviously distressed, obviously trying to be helpful in the least helpful possible way. “Old friend? Who attacked you?”

Ratchet sat on the medical berth and looked wretched. Megatron quickly stepped between them, feeling his lips skin back over non-existent fangs in instinctive defensive display. “I said out,” he said.

Orion’s optics flashed. “He’s my friend.”

“And right now, you’re not helping. Back off, Orion. We’ll talk later.” He glanced at Drift. “You too. You’re not helping. Go back to bed. *Now*.” He put authority into the last word, and Drift backed away quickly. Orion gave him a long, dubious look, clearly less impressed by his firmness than Drift.

“I know you’re his friend,” he said, stepping closer and pitching his voice only for Orion. “I know you’re worried, and I know it’s hard to see anyone like this. But I’ve been there.” He wasn’t sure he had, but it was the right thing to say. “And it’s easier—much easier—to have someone who’s not a close friend looking after you while it’s fresh. Orion, go back to recharge.”

Orion hesitated again, then nodded. “As long as you’re not going to let whoever did this to him go unpunished.”

Megatron’s mouth twisted wryly. “I think that’s his decision, not mine. I’ll tell you whatever he gives me leave to report.”

That mollified Orion enough to persuade him to leave.

When he turned around, Ratchet was still staring at his feet.

“Thanks kid,” he muttered.

“You can thank me after I’ve pulled those dents and checked you for a concussion,” said Megatron briskly. “I’m suspicious you’re more likely to curse me, though.”

Ratchet snorted and held out an arm.

Orion did not go to berth. Orion paced. Who would have hurt Ratchet like that, hurt him so badly

he didn't want to talk about it? Had there been injuries he couldn't see? Ratchet wouldn't be so cowed by merely being beaten by Overlord's thugs. Scenarios occurred to his overactive processor, each far worse than the last. What had Overlord *done*?

The door creaked open, slowly.

"He's asleep," said Megatron. "It's only a few dents and a broken nasal ridge. Somehow found him another optic lens, and he insisted on installing it himself."

Orion strode up to him. They were of a height, and it brought them nasal ridge to nasal ridge. "What the frag happened, Megatron?"

Megatron stared back at him steadily. "I don't know. Not for sure. I have only a suspicion."

"And that is?"

"Do you know Pharma?"

"Yes," said Orion. "He's a bit full of himself, but not all that bad a mech once you get past the tough act he likes to project."

Megatron gave him a long, evaluating look. "Thank you," he said after a few moments. "Yes, I think he was attacked because someone thought he had drugs on him. It shook him; he thought he knew the neighborhood. Don't say anything about it to him; it'll embarrass him worse."

And he left.

Another morning. Another body. Megatron sighed heavily after checking the bot's vitals and finding none. Ratchet was still blissfully unconscious and missed him bringing the pitiful thing in. This one had, at some point, been a pit fighter—there were the remains of weapons modifications, ripped from their mounts. Megatron placed him on the autopsy table, and began work.

About halfway through he stepped back with a sharp breath as he touched something and a sturdy, sharp blade sprang from the mech's arm, just over his wrist. It had been so perfectly concealed he hadn't known it had existed until he'd jostled the right internal wire. It had very narrowly missed one of his optics; he reached up to check said optic was still there.

Then he looked down at the blade, thoughtfully.

And started to smile.

He had an idea.

Chapter 27

Three nights and another four bodies later found Megatron, wrapped tightly in a rather tarnished metalmesh cloak he'd scrounged from the back of the clinic, walking with a step that was a lot more firm and determined than he felt toward the building Overlord styled his court. He had a plan. He had the new mod. He'd practiced, though admittedly only with the surgical hologram. Somehow, his hands weren't shaking.

One way or the other, and he was determined it would be his preferred way, he was ending this tonight.

"My name is Megatron," he said at the door, clutching the metalmesh cloak close about him. "I believe Overlord is expecting me?"

The doormech looked him over, a raking and invasive gaze. Megatron was abruptly very glad of the cloak's concealment. Mere plating wouldn't be enough under those optics.

"Yes," he said at last, and stepped aside. "Someone will escort you to him. You! Tell Overlord the medic's here to see him."

After a few moments, someone pushed his way through the crowd to them. A shuttle sized frame, a sullen gaze. "Huh. Doesn't look like much."

"Shut it, Astrotrain," snapped the doormech. "Take him to Overlord." An unpleasant smile. "Make sure he doesn't change his mind."

Megatron looked up at Astrotrain, all the angrier for knowing that he couldn't do much about this mech if he decided to do...well, anything Megatron didn't like.

Astrotrain sneered at him. "Don't make me carry you."

"Do you think me all so weaksparked as that?" snapped Megatron. "Go. Lead me to your master, and I shall tell him to keep you on a shorter leash."

"If it weren't for Overlord's claim on you, I would make you regret that, groundpounder."

Megatron bared his dentae. "Too bad for you, then."

The laugh he got in return made his plating prickle, nasty and pleased. "See how long he lets you keep that attitude. All his other toys lasted less than a week."

Megatron squared his shoulders, his right arm and its concealed blade suddenly feeling heavy and obvious. He said nothing, though he dearly wanted to snap some kind of threat at Astrotrain. He couldn't have them searching him.

"This way," said Astrotrain, and hustled him along through the main room and up a flight of stairs. The hallway they emerged into was a work of art, polished walls inset with brilliant stone, cunningly cut in sinuous shapes. Urns lined the walls. None of it, as far as Megatron could tell, was older than three years. No taste. Just riches.

The doors at the end of the hall were paneled in a rich organic wood. Absurd. Utterly absurd. Megatron couldn't even imagine how many times his medic's salary this was worth; the comparison to a miner's was even more laughable.

Astrotrain hauled the doors open and gave Megatron a firm shove inside, sending him sprawling into organic carpeting. “He’ll come for you when he’s ready,” he said, laughing, and closed the doors.

The lock chirped on.

Megatron slowly pushed himself up out of the thick dense fuzz--which still smelled new--and looked around. Dim light. No windows. No art here, just a very large berth. Big even for Overlord.

“Well,” he drawled, “Good to know he has a grasp of subtlety.” He looked down at the obviously fresh carpet, at the ostentatious furnishings. “And good taste.”

He was not going to sit on that berth like a good pay-bot. He was not going to wait as if he’d decided to fall swooning into Overlord’s grimy embrace. He stood up and began to pace.

The berth. He could hide under the berth. It was big enough. He knelt to examine it, then went to the door in the back of the room and tested the keypad. Locked. Of course. Damn him.

How was he going to get *out*, after?

Maybe hide under the bed until they went away? But who wouldn’t check there?

There was no good way out of this.

Maybe he could use one of Overlord’s built-in cannon to blast the little door open. There were ways to separate something like that from a corpse.

Yes. That’s what he’d do. He swallowed hard, trying to calm his fear. Reached for anger instead. He wasn’t Overlord’s. He *wasn’t*. No matter what the monster thought, fear was his, *Megatron’s* choice, not Overlord’s. And tonight, tonight, Overlord would learn what it was to cross the wrong mech.

Ratchet woke after an unusually long and deep recharge (Megatron was right, the berths at the back of the clinic were much nicer, much quieter) to a spate of messages from Pharma.

About time, he thought. It had been two days. He opened them, unsurprised by the apologies. The same as last time. He swung his legs down from the berth, stared at the floor. Then he deleted them all.

He wasn’t stupid. He knew exactly where he was. A slap was one thing. The other night was not a slap. Megatron knew so as well, and watching Megatron treat him like he’d taught Megatron to care for certain patients...

The problem was, he didn’t know what to do, other than to stay away. For now. He and Pharma had been the Iacon Medical Center’s power couple for so long. He didn’t know how to face the reactions from their friends and colleagues. And it wasn’t like he’d stopped loving Pharma after... after what he’d done the other night. He just wanted Pharma back *more* now. The way he used to be. Always present, always trustworthy.

He reached for the light, and a datapad clattered to the floor, turning itself on. He frowned, and lifted it.

It was from Megatron.

Ratchet, if I do not return by tomorrow morning, I am sorry.

I could not allow anyone else to be hurt. I had to do something.

“Oh kid,” whispered Ratchet. “Oh Megatron, you idiot.” He tried Shockwave’s comm signal again—nothing. Dead air. The implications of that terrified him as badly as the datapad in his hands did. He couldn’t try Orion. They’d end up with two dead idiots instead of just one; Overlord’s complex was damn near a fortress, and Orion, though discharged that morning, was still shaky on his feet. Primus alone knew what the inside of his processor looked like. There was nothing he could do.

I fully intend to return. Please know that. If I don’t, I only wanted to say thank you. For everything. You did more for me than I thought possible, for Terminus too.

Megatron’s signature glyph at the bottom. Then, hastily typed, filled with his usual typos, at the very bottom: *IF I’m right—Ratchet, people who love you don’t do things like that.*

Ratchet put the datapad down, buried his face in his hands, and hitched a sob in through his vents.

“Idiot,” he whispered. “Oh, you idiot.”

Drift peered in the door and hesitated.

Ratchet was curled over himself on the berth, a broken datapad at his feet. Drift knew what was on the datapad because he’d snuck in and read it himself after Megatron had left. He’d read it, and known with instant horror that he’d never be seeing the mech again, no matter what optimism Megatron had tried to put in the note.

Overlord’s toys did not walk away afterward.

Poor Ratchet. They had to be close, though it was strange to see a medic mourning a miner to such an extent, even if Megatron had been his protege.

And whoever had dented him so badly...

Drift had his suspicions, and they made him want to dismantle something. He’d seen plenty of those sorts of things, mecha beaten by the very people they trusted, and it enraged him. That, and Megatron leaving...

He’d pushed the door aside and stepped into the room before he thought, then sat next to Ratchet, who didn’t look up at him. After a few moments, he dared to put a hand on the medic’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“There’s *nothing* we can do,” snarled Ratchet at the floor, optics blazing.

“I know,” said Drift. “I’m sorry.”

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Read the tags. This is the chapter (one of the chapters) they apply to. This chapter involves Overlord, who is the opposite of good things.

It seemed like hours before the little door opened to admit Overlord, grinning broadly. Megatron's anger blazed up, comforting, better than fear. Overlord said nothing, turned and shut the door, then stood staring at him.

"Well, well. Look at you." He crossed the room, took Megatron by the shoulders. "Even in a shroud, you are lovely."

Megatron's own fears lent a nasty edge to that comment. He frowned, disliking the confinement. Overlord chuckled and pulled the hood of the cloak back, dipped down to the clasp. It slid from his shoulders and puddled, gleaming, at their pedes.

He wanted the cloak back. He shivered in the warm room, not liking Overlord's optics on him, not liking the firm hand that took his chin and tipped it up into a kiss.

Overlord tasted like good high grade, and the sweetness on his lips and glossa made Megatron want to purge. He very nearly did when that glossa shoved into his mouth, demanding and invasive.

"You taste good," said Overlord, and a servo palmed Megatron's panel. "I hope the rest of you measures up."

Megatron shuddered again with instinctive revulsion. "We need to talk."

"About what? Your presence here is indication enough."

"That I'm done," said Megatron. "I don't want you. Back off now. It's your last warning."

"Or what, little medic? You'll schedule me for a fuel systems overhaul? Very scary."

Megatron bared his dentae in a snarl. "No. Or you'll die."

The blow picked him up and threw him into the wall, and the impact fizzed his vision into static.

“I take threats very seriously,” said Overlord above him. “Laughable as it was, that was a threat. You will not threaten me again.”

Megatron snarled and surged upward, going for Overlord’s spark.

Overlord slapped him again, spun him around and shoved him facefirst into the wall. A hand caught his reaching arm and bent it behind him. Another rubbed over his panel. Overlord stepped forward, jamming a knee between Megatron’s legs as he tried to close them. Overlord’s body ground against his and the pressure of his fingers on Megatron’s paneling hurt, sent bolts of panic through Megatron’s frame.

“I could have you just like this,” Overlord purred in his audial, and Megatron vented hard, feeling the frantic terror fraying at the edges of his mind. He couldn’t get Overlord like this. The blade under his armor was as useless as if it didn’t exist.

Overlord’s knee scraped along his panel. “I bet you’re going to be good,” he said. “Miners like it rough, don’t they?”

It hurt. The fear was worse. Megatron turned his face away, panting into the wall, trying to throttle the fear back. I can’t do this if my hands are shaking, he told himself.

“But that would be boring,” said Overlord. Oh Primus. He could feel those lips moving against his audials. Drifting down along his neck, over the cabling there. “To win so soon. Besides, you deserve better than a wall. I’ll have you on the berth, as befits your new position. And I want to watch your face as I do. So proud, so arrogant, so assured. I’m going to bring that all crashing down.”

He kissed the back of Megatron’s neck. Laughed at the involuntary whimper that tore itself from Megatron’s vocalizer. Megatron bit his glossa hard enough to taste energon. The world swam, but the pain brought him back to the present. He had to keep his head. He had to keep his head. Oh Primus, he had to keep his head.

Overlord had stepped back, watching Megatron as he curled at his pedes, optics near white in terror.

“Here’s the game, Megatron,” he said. “You can either get on the berth yourself, or I’ll put you there... and then pull one of those pretty medic’s fingers right out. What’s it going to be?” He laughed. “Either way, I’m going to enjoy myself tonight.”

Megatron shuddered. Every bit of code he possessed screamed at him to curl into a tighter ball, hand over the back of his neck. Act like it was a cave-in, protect his spark and t-cog and all the soft vulnerable parts of his ventral side. He found himself curled, could not force himself to uncurl, not yet.

Overlord kicked him. He felt components dent. Another kick. Not aimed to damage, not seriously. It wasn't hard enough, Megatron could tell. Overlord wanted to hurt and frighten him.

Megatron had mixed pleasure and pain with Terminus, one heightening the other. He'd loved it, loved the thrill of it. This was worlds away. Brutal, artless, aimed to break, and that in the most base way possible. There was no elegance to it.

That was something he could despise, he realized, and suddenly the fear lifted enough to let him move again. Overlord was stupid and inelegant and shortsighted, and he was not Trepan. That was all Megatron needed.

He spat energon and oral lubricants at Overlord and charged him.

It did no good. Hard hands caught him and threw him onto the berth. Overlord was on top of him, hand by his face, hand on his paneling. Megatron shoved at the broad chest above him, arched away from the invasive dig of his fingers, bit the mouth that covered his, panic whitening his processor.

“Good!” said Overlord. “Good! I was hoping to have a little more fight out of you—”
He remembered the blade. Bent his hand out of the way, pressed hard to Overlord's chest, triggered it.

Overlord broke off in mid-sentence, staring at him. Megatron stared back, seeing shock in those optics, the slackening of the bloodied lips. He pushed back his own shock, retracted the blade. The stench of a failing spark rolled over him. Energon splattered on his faceplate, the berth, his frame, hot and stinking. Oil, too. Unnamed lubricants.

Overlord looked surprised. Not pained. Not angry. Just surprised, deep, utter, frightening surprise. The hand on his panel loosened.

Megatron threw himself out from under Overlord and under the bed. It should be thick enough, he hoped. The spark was going to gutter, and when it did...

VOMF. Things broke. The bed lurched. But Megatron was shielded, medic-grade plating designed to protect him from the harmful flare of a point one percenter spark in burnout. He shivered under the berth, Overlord's fluids already cooling on his plating.

They would have heard that. They would be coming. He forced himself to move—
—and the door opened.

Frag. Oh frag. He was going to die.

Rapid pedesteps, roughly the same size as his own. They paused; he glanced out, saw blue plating. A moment, then the mech bent to look under the bed. Megatron curled away, closing his optics to hide the glow.

“Come with me. Quickly,” the mech said. Megatron opened his optics again, saw a cassette host, red visor, an offered blue hand. He hesitated half a vent.

“Quickly. They will be here.”

He took the hand. Allowed himself to be pulled out and upright. The mech hurried him through the small door, locked it behind them. “You are not dripping,” he said. “Yet. Good. Come with me. The enforcers will notice you.”

“Why?”

“Overlord: dangerous. This way.”

He followed the mech, feeling the shaking set in. “I don’t understand.”

“Not required. In here. There is a washracks. You will be safe. Cassettes will guard.”

The doors opened and closed, leaving him in a sparsely furnished set of quarters with a number of red optics staring up at him.

He took a breath. Forced himself to be still. Pushed past the pain of the blow to his face. Forced calmness.

“Hello,” he said. “Your host tells me there are washracks?”

A cat-shaped mech cocked his head at his companions, then stood, sauntered past Megatron and toward another door. Paused to look over his shoulder with an inquiring gaze. Megatron followed.

The washracks were designed for a mech with symbiotes, large, spacious, and warm. He wondered what the blue mech had done for Overlord to earn it. He wondered if this was a trap. But he was too exhausted with fear to care. He stepped in and triggered the spray, relishing the cold blast of it.

He wished, briefly, for the mines. It had been simple. He hadn’t needed to deal with any of this. He’d never had to kill anyone.

The purge washed over him without warning, and he doubled over, retching. The first spasm subsided, and he knelt under the spray and shook. The second hit as he rose, flattening him again. After that, he stayed where he was, angry at himself, at his inconvenient frame, shoving away the enormity of what he'd done.

After a while, the cat-mech came in again, a soft towel in his mouth. He placed it on the convenience rack near the shower, then looked Megatron over. "First kill, huh?"

He'd been so silent Megatron startled at the words. "Yes," he said after a time. "I'm not...I'm a medic, I'm not supposed to do this..."

"Huh," said the symbiote. "It probably won't be your last. You'll be better about the purging with time."

Megatron gave him a dirty look.

It made him laugh. "Cube of energon waiting for you when you're done puking your tank lining out."

He turned to go.

"Wait," said Megatron. "Wait. What is your name?"

The mech's tail twitched. "My own business."

"I want to know who to thank."

"Better that you don't. Boss-bot will be back for you soon enough. Finish purging, refuel, be on your way. Things will be difficult enough around here without you knowing us."

"Very well."

He pulled himself upright, took the towel and dried off, amazed the energon had come off so easily. He felt odd, a sheen of unreality cloaking the whole. His hands still trembled, but it didn't seem to matter so much as it had.

It had been so much easier than he'd expected. The kill itself. Not what led up to it. He shuddered, remembering. No. Not what had led up to it. His panel still ached, as if Overlord's hand were still on it. He swabbed himself down hastily and went into the main room for the promised energon.

It was pretty decent. He drank it, quickly, glad the taste was so different from the stench of bodily fluids. He was a medic. He'd dealt with bodily fluids before. They'd never affected him like this.

"He'll be back in two megacycles or so," said the cat-symbiote. "Feel free to take a berth. You look like you need it."

"Thank you," said Megatron, and settled himself. He couldn't imagine sleeping, but the exhaustion and relief dragged him down anyway into a deep recharge.

Chapter 29

He woke to find the host staring at him, his visor a sliver of red in the gloom. He pushed himself up, slowly, feeling his plating flare with apprehension.

“Why did you help me?” he asked, almost a whisper. Anything louder seemed foolhardy.

The visor tilted. “Megatron: does not remember?”

Megatron shook his head. “No.”

Again, more forceful. “Megatron *of Tarn*: does not remember?”

“No.” There was something eerie in the way the mech said that. An echo of Orion at the clinic. Of Terminus. *Of Tarn*. He knew it was his name, had denied it when Orion asked out of deep seated instinct and suspicion. There had been something in how Orion had said it that had frightened him, and the same fear was stirring now. “No, I don’t remember. How do you know my name?”

A long, long pause after that.

“Soundwave...often goes unnoticed.”

The mech had given him a name. It was probably foolish of him. Which meant that this, whatever it was, whatever *Megatron of Tarn* meant to Soundwave, was incredibly important to him.

“Unnoticed by whom?”

“Functionists.” Pause. “Trepan. Overlord.”

Trepan and Overlord had talked. “They talk about me?”

“Functionists: did little *but* talk about Megatron of Tarn. Now, do little but talk about Optimus.”

“Optimus.” The name was unfamiliar.

A long pause, as if the mech thought he’d said too much. Then, slowly, “Megatron of Tarn was very important. To Soundwave. To cassettes.”

“Do I know you?”

The visor moved, side to side, a short, sharp shake of the head. “No. Megatron and Soundwave: never met in person. Important nevertheless. Trepan: gave Overlord permission to claim you. Trepan: will be displeased. Trepan: likely to seek alternative methods of neutralizing Megatron of Tarn. Soundwave: desired to warn you before your departure.”

Soundwave rose. “Come with me.”

Megatron, mind whirling, followed. He expected something more, a great reveal, but Soundwave simply led him to a small door, one that let him out into an alley. When he turned around, the door had shimmered into invisibility behind a hologram.

“Dear Primus. You look dreadful. Come on.” Ratchet hurried him inside. “On the repair slab with you. Let’s get those dents pulled, and some new paint.”

Megatron gave him a wry look. Other than those open-handed slaps, Overlord had stayed away from his face. Away from most really sensitive things. But he ached all the same, and the dents in his chestplate sparked unease deep in his tanks. He didn’t like how clearly Overlord’s fists were outlined.

He thought about the feeling of his concealed blade sliding into Overlord’s chestplates and felt himself smile. What had made him purge an hour ago now made him feel *good*. The look on that fragger’s face. He thought he could *own* mecha? Well, Megatron had put an end to those ideas.

Forever.

He was worried, distantly, that there was something wrong with that glee but the memories of the dead guttermecha crowded it out of his processor.

“Here,” Ratchet was saying. “This will sting. Holy frag, what did you do? No, I won’t ask. We’ll wash you off after, too. There’s a good cube of midgrade in it for you. Hold still.”

Megatron grunted as the dents were pulled, as the rest was buffed out. But it felt nice to have Ratchet fuss over him. He leaned back into it and smiled at Ratchet.

“You can stop being kind,” he said. “I’m fine. And I’m sorry for scaring you—you can start yelling at me if you’d like.”

Ratchet snorted. “I don’t need your fragging permission. I’m just glad to have you back. Now hold still, or I really will yell.”

It felt strange to be back in the office as if nothing had happened. Everyone was trying very, very hard to pretend nothing had happened, too. No one wanted to acknowledge what Overlord had done to Orion, because it might happen to them.

Orion ignored them and worked late. There was a lot to catch up on.

A little before dawn, a mech came in, making directly for his office. Orion eyed him; someone very like Drift at Ratchet’s clinic (funny how he now associated the two, as if Drift outside Ratchet’s clinic was unthinkable). This one, though, had a very different air. A confident unctuousness that he didn’t like.

When he spoke it was in a whisper, as he half bowed, half leaned over the desk. “I know which way the wind is blowing.”

Orion frowned, not liking his automatic subservience. “And what do you mean by that?”

The mech looked up. “You didn’t hear? Overlord was killed tonight.”

Orion looked down, closing his optics a brief moment. *Oh*, he thought. *That’s how it will be. I see.*

“Thank you,” he said aloud. “I had not heard. That is...interesting news.” He folded his servos behind his back. “Go. And be careful. I am sure the streets are not safe.” He smiled, not that the mech could see it, not that he wanted to smile, not really, and modulated his field to project warm

confidence out of habit. "I will tell you if I have need of your help."

There, that got him out of the office as fast as possible, so he could sit back and deal with the news. Overlord. Overlord *dead*. It seemed impossible, in defiance of all convention and expectation. It might be a lie, in which case he'd need to be very, very careful indeed. That mech was not one of his informants. Not even close. He was definitely one of Overlord's.

So if it were true, why would one of Overlord's take such pains to tell him?

Orion tidied away his paperwork, and rose. It was time to make inquiries.

Sentinel was a gearstick and Jazz was *not* having a good day. At least he'd gotten all the information and then some he'd come here for, but successful extraction was looking more and more unlikely. Unless Prowl and his division found a way to actually storm the Senate to arrest the lot of them.

"Prowler," he said softly into his built-in transmitter, "you're one-hundred percent right. They're up to everything you suspected and a lot more. Can we call it a day now? You know I don't spook easy, but Primus, I'm shakin' here, and I'm gonna be shakin' worse once Sentinel gets the Primacy."

"He likes you, Jazz," said Prowl, matter of fact. *"And we need you there. We can't make any arrests yet, but we need you there."*

Jazz shook his helm, but he'd expected as much. "I'll do my best."

He cut the comm, brought up the programs that hid most of his real feelings, field, identity, and slipped back into his role as Sentinel's head of security. He just hoped there would be enough of himself left next time he resurfaced.

Chapter 30

“Megatron.”

Megatron didn't look up, still sorting through the newly washed instruments. “Good evening, Orion.”

“Overlord died last night.”

Megatron dared to glance up into the tarnished mirror above the sink. “He did?”

“Yes.”

A long, long pause. Megatron held very still. After a moment, he made himself begin to move again, back to sorting. He was pleased to see his hands didn't tremble.

“Megatron...” Orion's voice trailed off. Megatron reminded himself that Orion was indeed an enforcer, not his friend. That if he suspected something...

It was self-defense, he wanted to say. Do you know what he wanted to do to me? How he wanted to own me, like some pet? How many others would he have done to what he did to you, if I held out? I had no choice, Pax.

No, I had a choice. And what I chose was to defend myself.

He said nothing. If Orion might go away, appeased, without further explanation, he would be glad of it. You did not tell Enforcers anything more than you had to.

“His people think I did it,” said Orion. “I do not know if you would believe me if I said I hadn't. My own suspicions are on some poor spark he'd attempted to intimidate too many times, made too desperate, but with the available evidence, with the nature of Overlord's...employment... here, I can do very little indeed. I would not want to do anything; whoever that poor spark was, he has likely been through enough.” Megatron felt his plating prickle as Orion looked hard at him. “Would any of your patients...”

“Medical confidentiality,” said Megatron quickly, annoyed at *poor spark*. “I would not tell you about my suspicions, even if I had any. He's dead. Good riddance; let's hope that the resultant infighting doesn't cause more deaths than he did.”

“There's the difficulty,” said Orion. “From what I can gather, from the gossip, from the number of his people who have been visiting me since his death, I think the citizenry expects me to step into his place. I think they think I killed him.”

Megatron couldn't help it. He threw back his head and laughed, hard, until cleansing fluid came to his optics. Orion Pax, stuffy, unimaginative, one-pede-in-front-of-another *Orion Pax*, murdering Overlord to take his place?

“I'm glad *someone* has a little faith in me,” said Orion, rather sourly. “So. The question is: should I?”

Megatron stopped laughing, turned and stared at him. “You're joking. And why come to *me*?”

“Because you and Ratchet are two of the only mecha I know with functioning senses of morality,

and Ratchet is still laughing,” said Orion. Megatron snorted.

“You wouldn’t last a day,” he said. “There are too many invested parties.”

“Soundwave was one of his lieutenants. Mostly, he followed Overlord because Overlord had threatened to kill his cassettes if he didn’t cooperate.” Orion looked unhappy. “He has a lot of them, even one who might be classed as an automaton—he looks like an organic cat, if we’re to be honest, and it can be somewhat unnerving.”

The big blue mech with the cassettes. The one who’d smuggled him out. Yes, Megatron remembered him.

“He’s promised me his loyalty.” Orion looked uncomfortable. “You know how I feel about these things. But if I could prevent a slaughter...”

Inside help changed the equation. “It’s your function, Pax. Do with it what you will.”

A long, heavy sigh. “I wish you would say more. I deeply respect your judgement.”

“What can I say?” snapped Megatron, wondering why the frag a police officer had decided his judgement was so superior, anyway. “It would kill you. Maybe not for a century, maybe not for ten centuries, but sooner or later, someone else is going to have this conversation about *you*. And at the same time, if you don’t, the chaos on the streets will take far more lives. Possibly even yours, given your sense of self-preservation. I trust you are a sensible mech. I trust you can see these things. So why should *I* tell you what to do? You’re your own ‘bot. I respect your autonomy.”

Another heavy sigh. “I see.”

“I have only one question for you, Orion,” said Megatron. “What price your spark?”

“I’m sorry?”

“This. You won’t remain the same mech. You can’t.” He turned and held Orion’s optics. “Is this cause—whatever you have in mind—worth that?”

Orion’s optics widened over his mask. “I...”

“Answer that. Then decide.”

“And...If I decide on the cause, will you...”

“Will I what?”

“Still wish to have contact with me?” Too hopeful to be a mere inquiry about friendship.

Megatron felt his hands begin to tremble. He tasted sweet energon again, smelled Overlord’s rank heat. Stepping into Overlord’s place. In every way. He was silent, mastering himself. Nothing as terrible as Trepan, but something very near revulsion. He finally managed, voice steady, “That depends on the mech it turns you into.”

“I see,” said Orion. “Megatron, I’m doing this for the best, as best I can manage. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I’m sure you believe it,” said Megatron, quiet, even.

Silence.

“If you don’t want...”

“I will let you know if and when I do,” said Megatron. He’d laid aside the tools. His hands were clenched on the washbasin.

“Then I won’t trouble you further,” said Orion, and with that, he was gone.

Megatron turned aside and leaned his helm against the cool surface of the cabinets, venting, until a horrible thought came to him.

They’ll tell him. His optics opened. *They’ll tell him they saw me go into Overlord’s berthroom. They’ll tell him Overlord died in there. They’ll tell him no one saw me come out. And if he’s angry at me...*

He would deal with it as it came. He told himself that over and over again and it did not ring true.

Ratchet. If he were accused, he had to warn Ratchet.

He forced himself away from the cabinet, to the door, to Ratchet’s office. “Sir, may I have a word?”

“I told you there’s no need for that, and if you’re looking for permission to pursue a relationship with Pax, I give you all my blessings, and a stern warning that the two of you are probably going to kill each other before the year is out,” said Ratchet, all in one deeply sardonic ventilation, not looking up from the requisition form. “Like you really need my permission.”

“It’s not that,” said Megatron, and shut the door behind him. Folded his hands behind him, out of the way. How to stand when your supervisor addressed you, spark exposed, hands and weapons as far away from him as they could be. “It’s not that, Ratchet, I...”

Ratchet looked up, put the form down. Said nothing.

“I killed Overlord. Orion Pax is going to find out, if he does what I think he thinks he means to, take over from him. Someone will tell him and—and I refused him, he might act on it, and I can’t let your reputation be tarnished as well...”

“I know,” said Ratchet, very quietly, and Megatron stared at him, struck speechless. After a moment, the older medic grinned. “I’ve still got a few tricks under my plating, kid. And I know Overlord was hunting you. You don’t think I knew what all those bodies on our doorstep were about? I had to warn him off you—as if that worked! It’s absolutely self-defense. You went to ask him to stop. He overpowered you. You killed him in the ensuing struggle.”

That wasn’t how it had happened. Megatron looked away.

“Don’t tell me otherwise,” said Ratchet. “Certainly, I heal everyone who walks through that door... but that doesn’t mean that I wouldn’t cheer if some of them dropped dead. I’ve spent enough time patching up Overlord’s victims to be quite sure that Primus has nothing to do with the generation of sparks—particularly that one! I’m just glad I didn’t have to stick you back together again afterward.”

Megatron stared at him, still without words.

Ratchet dropped his voice. “I know that your experiences haven’t given you much reason to believe this, but Orion wouldn’t do something like that to you in revenge. Your consent, or lack of consent, to flirtation will have nothing to do with what he chooses to do.”

“Thank you,” said Megatron.

Ratchet looked him up and down critically. “You look like Pit warmed over, kid. Sit down. Here, try this.” He filled a cup partway with something that glistened, dark pink and iridescent. “High grade. Fairly strong...but you look like you could use it.”

Megatron sat, looked at the high grade. “I haven’t finished sorting the...”

“Nonsense. You’re going to be one of my colleagues soon; I need to stop treating you like an intern. You can leave the instruments unsorted until morning.”

Megatron hesitantly accepted the high grade, just as hesitantly sampled it. It was sweet. His optics widened. Very sweet, smooth, an acid bite at the end. Wonderful.

Ratchet smiled at him over his own glass. “I thought you’d enjoy it. Towers mecha do so enjoy their sweets. Don’t worry about the cost; Shockwave has promised me a lifetime supply.”

“You really think it’ll be all right?” He sounded like he was just off the assembly line, and winced inwardly.

Ratchet set his glass down. “We both took an oath to do no harm,” he said. “But all those poor mecha left on the clinic stoop? Primus, Megatron, *I* couldn’t see a good solution. Shockwave wasn’t responding to his calls, and I didn’t know what to do. Given all that, I can’t fault you. Not really. Orion for stepping into Overlord’s place, sure. You? No.”

Megatron looked up at him. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Ratchet reached out to pat his hand. “You’ll have to make ugly choices as a medic, Megatron,” he said. “Usually, they won’t be this direct. But they still happen. It’s all right, and for what it’s worth, I’m not angry with you. Now drink your high grade like a good mech.”

Megatron gave him a small smile. “Thank you, Ratchet.”

Chapter 31

"I can't believe you actually did it," said Drift, who'd somehow found out without Megatron saying anything. It was probably the listening at doors. "You actually—,"

"Drift," said Megatron, firmly, and glanced significantly upwards, the usual signal for *you don't know who could be listening*. Drift settled down, but bits of his armor were still ruffling with excitement.

"Primus. Who do you think will take over?"

"It's anyone's guess. Help me with the autoclave."

Drift helped. He was quite a good assistant, when he wanted to be.

"Do you think Orion..."

"I really don't pay attention to those things," said Megatron, who was currently a filthy liar for that and had been considering talking to Orion at length.

Drift sighed. "Stop pretending to be Ratchet 2.0 and answer the question, Megatron."

Megatron blinked down at him with surprise.

"You and Orion. Orion and you." Drift gave him a meaningful look.

Megatron snorted and looked away. "No. Nothing's happening there."

"You've seen him looking at you, right? He's half in love."

"Drift, are you trying to be helpful? Because this is the opposite."

"You're an idiot." Megatron blinked at the venom, the abrupt change in tone from gently teasing to genuinely irritated and disdainful. "Look. People think Orion snuffed Overlord, right? That he's going to be Overlord's successor. *That makes him a powerful mech.* And he's interested *in you*. And isn't going to *pull you to bits* like Overlord would. Given his reputation, he's going to be all sweet and genteel about courting you, and he'll treat you well. You have enemies. You *definitely* have enemies, big, nasty ones, and you're—," a flick of a hand took him in, big, still awkward in medic's paint, an outsider, "obvious. And obviously lower-caste. Ratchet can ignore this slag, he can always walk away from this clinic, but do you *really* think you can? Do you *really* think you'll *ever* be working outside the Dead End? You know that everyone above the gutter will clutch their sparks and purge their tanks at the mere thought of being treated by a mech like you. This is where you're going to *be*, Megatron. And this is where you're *needed*, because you're *learning* the gutter better than Ratchet did, half your spark was already here. And if you're going to stay here, you *have* to play the game by the rules, and one of the first is, if someone big and important wants to protect you? *Let him.*" Drift folded his arms. "So sooner or later, you need to march your aft down to wherever Orion's set up shop and start flirting."

Megatron opened his mouth to retort. Decided there was nothing he could say, and closed it again. He went back to unloading the autoclave.

Drift stood and watched, making no move to help. Long after the silence had stretched into discomfort, he added, "Besides, the way Ratchet was talking to him, he might know something

about your past.”

That got Megatron’s attention.

“Yes,” he said after a few moments, thinking of Orion. The way he’d said *Megatron of Tarn*. “I suppose he might.”

“Dead?” Trepan’s hands didn’t shake. He refused to let anyone see his hands shaking, tucked them quickly behind his back. “How—how can he be dead?”

The mecha at the door shrugged. “One of his rivals bumped him off.”

Trepan’s voice was very near a shriek. “Who? Give me a name, or I swear, the two of you won’t even know how to *transform* when we’re done with you!”

The guards on the door shrugged. “A cop. Former cop, now. Orion Pax. He’s taking over. Says he wants to clean the place up.” They looked at each other, and the one who had spoken snorted. “We know how long that’s gonna last.”

“Well, let me see him!”

“Sorry. No guests.”

They didn’t know who he was. Trepan stared at them in impotent fury, then turned on his heel and stalked away. Overlord dead—how could he be *dead*? The mech was enormous. He even dwarfed the troublesome miner. He was enormous, and a good fighter, and now *dead*.

Add to that Shockwave on the run, with the artifact, and it was a very bad week. At least that kerfuffle had distracted attention from Trepan’s own little mess with Megatron, that Overlord had *supposed* to have solved, but still!

He wanted to get back to the Institute. Somebody was going to suffer for this. And if nothing else, it would make *him* feel better.

Orion himself showed up about a week later, with several crates in tow. “Is Ratchet here?”

Megatron folded his arms, much more amenable to Orion’s presence now he’d spoken with Ratchet. Ratchet, he trusted. “No, he’s doing rounds at the hospital. What are you doing?”

Orion gave him a slightly amused look, and dragged the antigrav cart with the crates into the clinic. “Spare parts. *New* spare parts. I’ve been having everyone do inventory of all the things Overlord and his cronies were hoarding and there’s a full room of medical supplies. Including direct-from-manufacturer, packaging-still-sealed spare parts. Joints, struts, optics, all the things you need to keep your bullies functioning after they pick a fight with the enforcers. Wish I knew who’d been doing that work, but he’s probably long gone by now. Lots of mecha fled as soon as Overlord offlined—either because they didn’t want to answer for what they’d done under him, or because he was forcing them to work for him.” He shrugged. “Can’t blame them. We also solved a lot of missing persons cases. The recent ones, at least.”

“Oh?” Megatron had already pried open a crate and was staring, delighted, at the contents. This was enough to supply them for months.

“Yes. He had a smelter, was recycling whoever turned up dead.” Orion’s voice had gone grim, implying that *turned up dead* was something Overlord and his cronies had taken an active hand in. “Probably couldn’t use it often because of the energy drain, so we found the corpses awaiting recycling.”

“Appalling.”

“Yes.” They sorted the crates for a time.

“So, is this *all* due to random chance?” said Megatron after a time. “Or...”

Orion gave him a wry look. “I’m sure you heard Ratchet yelling at me earlier.”

“Yes, I did. You’re attempting to get back into his good graces.”

“If he has any.”

Megatron, all too familiar with Ratchet’s bad temper and the way it completely eclipsed every hint that the mech might have a scrap of faith in Cybertronian competence, kindness, or intelligence, snorted. “Thanks all the same.”

“You’re welcome,” said Orion. He helped with the rest of the crates and the sorting before departing. Megatron watched him go, frowning as he did.

Perhaps he had been wrong to react to Orion as he had. Ratchet had reassured him, and he trusted Ratchet’s judgement.

And Drift was right.

Not about the protection, but about Orion seeming to know about his past.

Megatron’s frown deepened. If he ever did want to find out who he’d been, and he *was* curious, terribly so, he needed to go back and talk to Orion. Ratchet had the location of Orion’s residency, after all. And Orion seemed more than happy to talk to him.

He stood there several more moments, weighing his curiosity against his own anger at what Orion had done.

Curiosity won.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

In which extraordinarily bad interpersonal decisions are made.

Orion found Megatron on his doorstep several days later, looking uncomfortable. “May I come in?”

As if several of his fantasies hadn’t started with those same words. But Orion had been turned down twice; he knew better than to ask again. Instead, he stepped aside and gestured. Megatron, his frame all one flinch, followed.

“You’re packing,” he said, when the door closed.

“Yes,” said Orion. “It seems like I will have to find someplace more secure—and where innocent bystanders are less likely to be drawn into any conflicts.”

“How considerate.” Megatron mastered himself with an effort and turned to look at him. “I have questions for you.”

Orion gestured to the chairs and seating bench arranged around his small table. “Please, make yourself comfortable. I’ll answer what I can.” He carefully took a chair across from Megatron, not wanting to be physically intimidating, making a show of respecting the other mech’s boundaries.

Megatron sat. Or rather perched. “It’s about me. You seemed to know me from before, and you’re not the only mech who has. Ratchet won’t tell me who and what I was, before I was reformatted. Somehow, I think you might.”

“Ratchet is concerned for your safety,” said Orion.

Megatron’s mouth twisted. “I gathered as much. But why?”

Orion raised a hand. “I have one question first: is it really just coincidence that you’re named Megatron of Tarn?”

Fear flicked across Megatron’s face, something horrible and profound that almost made Orion recoil. It was some time before Megatron said, with a great effort, “No, it is not coincidence.”

“And you remember nothing before—?” Orion gestured to him.

“Nothing before the reformat, save that I was a miner.”

“I see.” Orion rose, went to his shelves, shuffled the datapads and various medals around and then touched the wall in a certain place. A tiny slot opened. He pulled out the pad it contained. “I am almost certain—and I think Ratchet is more so—that prior to your reformatting, you were a writer of considerable talent.”

There was a sharp noise of something too bitter to be amusement from Megatron. “A writer? I can’t write. I’m terrible at it, Ratchet knows that. Ratchet’s *graded* it.”

Orion hesitated, the pad in his hands. "I'm sorry."

He turned around, put it in Megatron's. "I know almost nothing of what happened to you. I just know what you were. A revolutionary. Your words ignited hope across Cybertron, of a better world where form would not dictate function. Where a miner wouldn't have to struggle to be a medic. Where someone like me could be a scholar, or someone like Drift, a renowned warrior. As far as I can gather, the Functionists found you. And punished you." He gestured to the datapad. "You wrote that."

Megatron powered it on, head bending to read it. "This was mine?" he said. "This was me?"

"Yes," said Orion. "I've collected all your writings. And when you stopped writing I... I tried to continue." He handed Megatron a second datapad. "It's a poor tribute, but I didn't want them to silence this forever. You're right, we have to fight this, however we can."

"Megatron of Tarn," whispered Megatron, like a benediction. "Of Tarn." It sounded like he was understanding something for the first time. "Primus. Orion—I cannot thank you enough."

"No," said Orion. "I cannot thank you enough. You began this. And even if you cannot continue it, someone will. I'm only one of many."

They were very close, he realized suddenly, and there was something different in Megatron's optics, a shocked sort of trust, something like affection.

Megatron looked away quickly. "There's a lot that hasn't made sense," he said, matter of fact, an obvious effort. "A very great deal. This...this draws some of it together." He flicked on the datapad with Orion's own writings, and then glanced at him with a smile. "*Optimus?*"

"A penname," said Orion, feeling awkward.

"I like it," said Megatron, and began reading, nodding occasionally. Orion went back to packing. It was something to do, to still his shaking hands. After a while, Megatron changed datapads and began reading his own work.

"So," he said, and Orion straightened up suddenly, striking his head on the cabinet he'd been cleaning under.

"That sounded painful," said Megatron, suddenly much closer. "Let me see that."

"Thank you," said Orion, as deft fingers examined his head.

"Well," said Megatron, "I'm glad to say it's probably not fatal."

Orion glanced at him, their faces level. Megatron's expression was calm, tender even, and his optics flickered through a reset as he watched.

"I know I've said this before," he said. "But thank you."

Orion shook his helm. "It's only a continuation of your work," he said.

Megatron's optics flickered again and then quickly, as if he feared losing his courage, he pressed a fast, clumsy kiss to Orion's mask. He pulled away—and Orion pulled him back in, sliding his mask aside, returning the kiss with interest.

The way Megatron moved with him, the way his mouth parted under Orion's own, the smell and

taste of him—it was all perfect, it was all more than Orion had ever dared imagine. He wrapped an arm and hand around the slender waist and pulled him in tight, still kissing.

“I fell in love with you a long time ago,” he admitted when they parted, both flushed and panting, Megatron looking startled. “With the mech who had the courage to pen those words. It was foolish—I feared I’d fallen in love with someone of my own imagining, but meeting you has been no disappointment. I’m sorry for having moved so fast.”

Megatron smiled a crooked little smile that made his spark leap into his intakes, and before Megatron could respond, he leaned forward and kissed him again. Gentle, exploring. A question rather than a demand, and Megatron responded in kind, his mouth angling against his. Hesitant hands explored his back kibble.

Orion’s fans clicked on, and he guided them back so he could lean against a solid wall and concentrating on kissing instead of standing. He ran his hands up and down Megatron’s back, gratified when Megatron made a soft little gasp and leaned into him. He dipped a hand down, toyed with the wiring of Megatron’s hip, eliciting another sharp gasp and a clench of hands on his back. Megatron was running hot, pressing tight to him and his every angle in a way that seemed physically impossible; someone with armor like his shouldn’t be so supple!

Someone’s panel clicked open and it took Orion a few long moments to realize it wasn’t his. He pulled back a little, releasing Megatron’s waist with one hand to catch Megatron’s wrist, gently disengaging Megatron’s hold on his back and bringing the hand within range of his mouth. Medic hands were sensitive; Ratchet had remarked on that many times, and Orion couldn’t wait to try it.

He turned his face into the palm of Megatron’s hand to kiss it. Megatron made a very quiet noise, completely arousing. Orion smiled and began mouthing his way along Megatron’s palm to the tip of a finger, then sucking that and the adjacent finger into his mouth, exploring the joints of the fingers.

Megatron sagged against him, clutching at his shoulder as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. Orion shifted his grip so he could support him better, releasing his fingers and kissing his way back to the inside of his wrist.

Megatron’s hips shifted toward him. His helm tilted back, optics blazing slits. “More,” he rasped.

Orion turned his attention to the other fingers he’d so far neglected, thrilling at the way Megatron trembled, then stiffened in overload. When Megatron could stand on his own again, he slipped fingers down his aft, pulling back a little to be able to watch Megatron’s face. “May I touch you?”

Megatron shivered. “Please,” he rasped, and Orion slid them along the wet slit of his valve, toying with the node, careful to keep his touches gentle. Megatron buried his face in Orion’s neck and trembled, hips hitching forward and back with the movements of his fingers.

Orion switched to the other hand, guided Megatron’s hands to the wall so he could brace himself, and lowered himself to his knees. It brought him level with Megatron’s spike, and he wrapped his fingers around it and gave it a long firm stroke.

He felt the air go out of Megatron’s vents, saw Megatron sag toward him, and smiled, put a hand on Megatron’s hip and his mouth over the tip of Megatron’s spike, running his tongue around the head, probing at the slit. Another huff of hot air, and Megatron’s hips twitched forward. Optimus almost laughed, and leaned up and forward to swallow more of Megatron’s spike.

It felt good, hot, heavy, tasting of clean metal and arousal. He moaned around it, feeling his own

panels seem to tighten. Megatron aroused was *addictive*, his silence a challenge, the habit of someone who'd lived all his life in hiding, one way or another. Orion firmed his one handed grasp on Megatron's hips and bobbed his helm, forward and back, meeting Megatron's aborted thrusts halfway. He was still sliding a finger back and forth across the entrance to Megatron's valve. After a few more moments, he slid it inside. Megatron only stayed upright with an effort.

It wasn't long before Megatron overloaded again, spilling down Orion's throat. Orion looked up at him, a wonderful picture of helpless arousal. The metal of his face was actually faintly pink with heat.

"Floor or couch?" he asked.

"Couch," said Megatron, firmly. Orion disengaged, taking Megatron's hand in his, and guided him back to the couch. Megatron sat. Orion knelt in front of him, leaned up for another kiss, bringing his closed panel flush against Megatron's bared valve, already wet. Megatron kissed back, hand tight around the back of Orion's neck, a desperation in his kisses that spoke of horrible loneliness. Orion's hips canted forward almost of their own volition, feeling Megatron begin to make the smallest twitches against his panel.

He finished the kiss, panting, then smiled up into Megatron's face. "Can I help you with that?"

Megatron snorted, jerked his head in a nod, and Orion sank back onto his knees, looking at the valve and spike before him. He gently urged Megatron's legs apart, glanced up at him, leaned down and kissed the inside of his thigh, eliciting a hiss. He murmured a laugh, working his way to the apex of Megatron's thighs. The way Megatron's hips jerked, the harsh vent, were reward enough.

He tasted good, the heady musk of a healthy and *very* aroused mech, and Orion heard himself moan deep in his vocalizer. Megatron's hands moved down to his helm, stroking his audials, and they tightened at the vibration. Orion reached up to better spread him open, laving over the neat entrance, the red biolight on his anterior node. Megatron's hips rocked into his face, he felt the fluids dripping down his chin, and moaned again. His panel had opened. He wasn't sure when, but he felt like he was going to overload just from doing this, from the tiny noises Megatron made. So quiet, so so quiet. He wanted to tell Megatron he was safe, he could be as noisy as he pleased.

Warmth bloomed in his spark, a desire to protect and comfort. He moved upwards to Megatron's anterior node, lavishing attention on it and reveling in the movements of Megatron against his face, at the way he went stiff and shivered in overload. He backed off so he wouldn't overstimulate the sensitive equipment.

Megatron looked down at him, helm thrown back, panting. He smiled, leaned back in to start again. Megatron's hands clenched on the edge of the couch, and he made a small hissing sound. Orion put a hand on each side of Megatron's waist and held him in place, intent on thoroughly cleaning out his valve.

At last Megatron made a small noise, a half-breath with a hint of a whine in it, and that small loosening of control sent him over the edge. He stilled, unable to concentrate as he overloaded, letting out a moan of his own. A glance up showed him Megatron with the back of a hand pressed against his mouth, still looking down at him with blazing optics.

"You're beautiful," he said softly, panting. He was still hard, he wanted to stand, to pull Megatron onto his spike, legs wrapped around his waist, frag him senseless like that. He wanted to hold him tight, slowly interface him into a relaxed strutless heap. To simply kiss him and not stop.

Megatron breathed something like a laugh and held out a hand. “Come here,” he said.

Orion went. Megatron kissed him again, now hard and demanding. His spike, too, was stiff. A hand seized Orion’s aft, guiding him into place, and Megatron bucked upward to seat the tip of Orion’s spike in his valve.

Orion gasped at the wet clenching heat around him and only with an effort kept from sheathing himself to the root. Megatron under him was panting as well, hands trembling. He was tight, not quite stretched enough.

“Move,” whispered Megatron. “I won’t break.”

Orion rocked gently forward. “I won’t hurt you.”

Megatron’s optics blazed up at him. “I *want* it to sting,” he said. “I prefer that. Move!” His hand tightened on Orion’s aft, joined by another, and he pulled Orion firmly, bucking as he did.

Orion gasped in surprise, suddenly deep in tight silken heat. Megatron let out a long sigh of pleasure, genuine though Orion was certain that must have hurt him.

“Frag me,” hissed Megatron. “Rough. *Please.*”

Orion gave into the baser impulse to pound into the slick heat under him, and Megatron rose to meet each thrust, optics shuttered, venting in sharp gasps. He overloaded in moments, and Orion groaned at the rippling clench around him, gentling his movements.

“I won’t break,” said Megatron again, when he’d recovered himself, snapping his hips up to make the point. Orion laughed a little and resumed his earlier pace.

This time he overloaded before Megatron did, used a finger on Megatron’s node to bring him to completion as well before stepping back and collapsing on the couch next to him. After a moment, he turned Megatron’s face to his with a finger and kissed him, sweet and slow.

Megatron blinked sleepily at him, reached to put a hand on his shoulder, and closed his optics. After a few moments, Orion realized he’d fallen asleep.

He couldn’t just leave him there. With some effort—miners were heavy to start with, and medics still heavier—he hefted Megatron and moved him to the recharge slab, collapsing next to him. He’d clean up later, he thought, before he too slipped into recharge.

The incident with Overlord had spooked him, Ratchet readily admitted that much, and so he’d asked Megatron to carry an external holo-communicator with him when he went out. Upon returning to the clinic that evening and finding Megatron nowhere in evidence, Ratchet called the link.

It buzzed several times before anyone picked up, and Ratchet stared for several long moments before saying anything.

“Orion,” he said at last, “Have you debauched my apprentice?”

It could have been an amusing question, in more or less any other tone of voice. It was not, in fact, faintly amusing in the way Ratchet had asked it. It was all but a declaration of war.

Orion actually reset his vocalizer with an audible, nervous click. “I,” he started, and then, “*Er. Perhaps I have.*”

Ratchet glared at him. “And what did I tell you?”

“*To be cautious about getting close to Megatron, yes, I recall.*”

“Exactly.”

“*Ratchet...*” Orion looked determined, but worried. “*Circumstances have changed. I know you wanted to protect him initially, but now things have changed, and I can keep him safe. You don’t need to worry about me putting him in more danger.*”

Ratchet stared at him. “You idiot,” he said. “I’m not worried about *his* safety, but *yours*.”

Orion blinked. “*What?*”

Ratchet glowered. “You heard me. The last lover he had got disappeared. The last *friend* he had probably got shadowplayed. You’re an idiot, Orion.” He paused. “And it should go without saying that if you hurt him, I’ll reformat you into a toaster.”

There was a long silence.

“*I think I’ve figured out most of his background for myself,*” said Orion at last. “*At some point, I’d like to hear your suspicions as well. For now, though, he’s perfectly well. And in recharge.*” The visual pickup swung around to show Megatron, flat on the berth, oral lubricants staining the slab. “*I don’t plan to disturb him. It’s not an emergency, is it?*”

“No, it’s not,” said Ratchet, doing nothing to conceal his irritation. “Go sleep, Orion, I’ll just yell at you more next time I see you.”

“*Something to look forward to, I’m sure,*” said Orion, and cut the feed.

Chapter 33

It took him a moment to realize where he was, and *why* he was there, and when he did, Megatron pressed a hand over his optics and just barely restrained himself from groaning.

This was a mistake.

To put it *mildly*.

He was lonely. He missed Terminus. Orion had done a handful of things that reminded him of Terminus, and here he was in berth with him, because apparently he was an idiot when it came to restraining his impulses.

And he *definitely* had recharged better than he had in months with a large, warm mech sharing the slab.

Frag.

He turned his head to look at the mech in question, slumbering with his back toward him, deeply in recharge, glossy red paint smudged and scratched.

Handsome, to be sure, but it wasn't fair.

Not to Orion, not when he was still deeply in love with Terminus. Who'd said not to wait. He wouldn't have said that if he'd thought he'd return alive, and now Megatron had context, he was sure he'd never see Terminus ever again.

It didn't erase Terminus's hold on his spark. Not at all.

He wasn't at all in love with Orion, and Orion obviously did love him, and that and how lonely he was—

He was an idiot.

And he was going to have to tell Orion.

Who mumbled sleepily, endearingly, and turned over to wrap an arm around Megatron's waist and kiss the tip of his nasal ridge. "Good morning."

Frag. Frag frag frag.

Orion was solid and warm against him, his lips gentle, his arm comforting but not confining, a smile in his optics. Frag.

Against his better judgement, Megatron kissed him back. Orion returned it with interest.

Oh, thought Megatron, because that kiss went a long way toward explaining why he'd been such a fool. Orion was good with his mouth.

Orion pulled away from him, slow and reluctant, smiled at his expression. "Would you like some energon?" he asked. "I ought to have offered some last night, but we both fell into recharge so quickly..."

He was sure he should have refused, but his tank cramped with hunger. He nodded, and Orion slid

out of his arms and off the berth, quickly vanishing into the next room. After a few moments, he heard the sound of energon being dispensed into cubes, and the clatter of glass and metal.

He rolled over and rubbed the heels of his hands against his optics. *Idiot*, he thought again, then paused, almost groaned out loud, because Orion was humming.

He'd been nervous around the mech. Largely because of his position. Largely because of Overlord. Whom he *refused* to give any more thought. That had been horrible, but he had won, and Overlord was where he belonged—very, very dead. Orion had proven himself, quite rapidly, extremely different. His writings cemented it. What he'd read had certainly been sufficient to make him go from nervous to appreciative.

That much made sense to him. The fact that things had progressed so rapidly after that kiss also made a certain amount of sense. He passed a hand over his intake, but could still feel the ghost of Orion's on his, and his interface systems warmed somewhat at the thought.

Why the frag he'd decided to kiss the mech in the first place, however, he would have to put down to temporary insanity. Loneliness. Seeing Terminus in him. Something. Whatever way he looked at it, he'd been an idiot.

His optics widened.

Ratchet was going to kill him.

Orion returned to his room to find Megatron casting about for the holo-comm. "I should tell Ratchet where I am, he'll be concerned..."

"I've already spoken to him," said Orion, somewhat sheepishly. Megatron looked up at him, a question in his optics, and Orion smiled wryly. "I don't think he's as angry with you as with me. I think I'll have a while longer before he forgives me for any of this."

Megatron gave him a still more worried look.

"Here," he said, to change the subject, and held out the tray he carried. "I have some additives and supplements, and I didn't know what you preferred, so..."

That made Megatron look startled, then smile, then move over and pat the berth next to him. "That's very kind of you."

They stirred in the supplements in silence, Megatron looking lost in thought. Orion didn't like that. It worried him. He reached over and put a gentle hand on Megatron's arm. "Are you all right?"

Megatron put the cube down, and huffed out a soft vent. "I... What are you hoping for, between us?"

Orion blinked. He hadn't thought of an us. To be honest, he hadn't been thinking much the previous night, only how good it felt to kiss Megatron, how desperately he wanted to do something to soothe that loneliness he'd seen in the other mech's optics. To offer something for the pain he must have suffered, the cruelties at Functionist hands. To make him feel safe for once. How he wanted to ensure that no one would hurt him again, and to have Megatron know that.

Part of his processor supplied him with how wonderful it would be to wake every morning with

Megatron in his berth, peaceful and happy, how good it would be to hear those small controlled gasps and almost-whines on a regular basis. The clenching silken heat of his—

Primus, he'd started to blush.

Megatron was still looking at him, worried.

He let out a long vent, and said what he didn't really mean. "I'm not sure. I think...whatever you want." He looked shyly at the other mech, gauging his reaction.

Megatron gave him a very small smile. "I see," he said, then his smile dropped away and he seemed to fold in on himself.

"Megatron." Oh how he loved saying the name like that, soft, without worrying about being inappropriate. A friend or a lover, the tone could work for either. It was the emotional intimacy, not the physical, which would matter, he told himself firmly and almost believed it. "It's all right. If you're not interested, I'm not about to push. You're safe—I know Ratchet's been worried that I might draw even more attention to you, but I'll make sure you're protected." He smiled, not minding that Megatron could see his face.

Megatron reared back, offended and alarmed. "Protected? I'm not doing this for *protection*. I'm doing this because...because..." he trailed off, suddenly looking horribly lonely again. Orion reached for him without thinking. Megatron, almost as unthinkingly, leaned into it.

After a moment, he let out a very long vent, shoulders slumping again. "This isn't right," he said. "It isn't fair to you. It isn't about you. There's—there's someone else. I won't see him again. He told me not to wait. He wouldn't have said that if there was the slightest chance..."

He trailed off again.

Orion stroked his back, comforting circles.

"You reminded me of him," said Megatron. "I was worried you'd be like Overlord. But just then, you reminded me of him. Of Terminus. I'm sorry. I should—"

"Whatever your reasons," said Orion gently, his spark gone cold at Overlord's name, "you are welcome here. I won't hold them against you."

A pause, as things came together horribly in his processor. "Overlord," he said.

Megatron said nothing.

"Was it you he was after?"

Megatron stepped firmly back. Orion let him go instantly, saw the look on his face and knew the answer before he said, "Yes."

Orion shook his helm, half-laughing. "Primus, I can't believe you or Ratchet didn't murder me! I'm sorry. I hope I didn't..."

Megatron looked sick. "I'm sorry I compared you," he said. "After what he did..."

"I know. And I'm amazed you're here. You're a very brave mech, Megatron, and I admire that deeply." Orion took both his hands in his own, and looked into his optics. "I do enjoy your company. I would like nothing more than to continue this." An understatement, he realized. "But

you're your own mech, and if you don't want this—if this is something for just this once—you have my word I'll respect that.”

Megatron looked away. “And if I don't know? If I can't know?”

That was even worse. “I understand. After what you've been through—and what you learned today—you have every right to be uncertain.”

He hated saying it more than he'd expected. He said it anyway. It was true, and it was the right thing to say, even if he didn't like it.

He gestured to the energon. “I'm certain you don't fuel enough,” he said. “Go ahead.”

Megatron sipped, then drank deeply. “You have good taste in supplements.”

“I try to collect a few here and there. I enjoy experimenting with the flavors, and it's not too expensive...” He heard the embarrassment in his own voice, saw the ghost of a smile on Megatron's face. He was glad to see it. Megatron this morning was almost, if not quite as, bad as he had been when he came in. He wasn't still flinching, that was good, but Orion was now very worried. There was a grimness behind the other mech's optics that was all wrong.

He wasn't sure what he'd done. He tried to remember the previous night. He'd been careful, he'd asked every step of the way. What had he stumbled into? What sort of horrible or sad memories had he stirred up accidentally.

“Are you all right?” he asked again.

Megatron shook his head as if clearing it. “I'm fine. It's only that I was remembering Terminus. And what happened to him.” He looked at Orion. “I'm sorry. Overlord's death, and now what you've told me—it has been a lot to process.”

“I understand. I'm glad someone killed him,” he couldn't believe what he was saying, but it was true, horrible as it was, “before he actually got to you.”

Megatron was quiet. He drank from the cube, careful and fastidious. Then, “So am I. It was... not good.”

“I imagine so.” Orion wanted to hold him, comfort him, but restrained himself. If Megatron wanted more, he would have to be the one to move first, as unlikely as that would be.

Orion had believed the lie, and Megatron was pleased with himself, though still nervous. What he'd told Orion about being unsure what he wanted was quite true. He had no idea. He didn't know what he could and could not bear, whether he could have more than an ill-judged tumble with someone who wasn't Terminus, Terminus's last words to him be damned.

Orion... didn't seem to be a bad option. He glanced at the mech, barely restraining the tremble in his plating. No. Not a bad option at all, after last night. He wasn't sure how he felt about his partner making the activities all about him—he wasn't sure about feeling so passive—but it had been very pleasant.

Though a very bad idea. Ratchet really was going to kill him.

He felt tired, and overwhelmed, and right now simple physical proximity seemed like the most comforting thing possible. He looked sidelong at Orion, knowing Orion wouldn't be the first one to make a move. It was a terrible idea, committing the same mistake again just after he'd told Orion that he didn't know if he could reciprocate his affections, but he felt the same loneliness, the same insecurity, and before he thought better of it, his hand was on Orion's, and Orion looked at him with such tenderness that Megatron leaned in and kissed him, and very soon the cubes and their fuel were forgotten completely.

Chapter 34

What Ratchet *actually* said when Megatron returned to the clinic was, “In my informed medical opinion, you’re an idiot,” and then gave him a small, tight smile. “That said, I’m just as glad you have someone. Even if it is that risk-taking twit. Come help me clean this.”

He nodded and hastened to help Ratchet clean the reusable bench pads.

The afternoon and evening passed uneventfully enough, save for Drift venturing out of the clinic for the first time. Megatron wasn’t entirely sure if they’d see him again—free from the fear of Overlord, Drift likely didn’t have a pressing reason to return. Megatron hoped he might. He’d grown to rather like the younger mech, and he deeply appreciated the way he made Ratchet cheer up. Ratchet needed all the cheer he could get. He had yet to return home after his most recent injuries.

Megatron’s suspicions had grown more solid, but he had little idea of what to do. He’d seen this before in the mines, and you couldn’t separate someone from an abusive bondmate until they were ready to leave. It just reinforced everything the abuser was saying—or invited still worse retaliation. But it hurt his spark to stand by and watch Ratchet—who’d saved him in every sense of the word—hurt by someone he trusted.

He finished the last few things to be done late that night. Ratchet was on one of the berths in the back, still, and asleep. It was about fragging time. He looked sad. Worried. Somehow smaller, and Megatron frowned at him for a time. Ratchet should be always in motion, he felt, acidic wit always in play. This wasn’t right, him looking this way in his sleep, anxious, drawn. He wished he could do something, but he couldn’t very well murder Pharma. He sighed, turned away, and began to lock up the clinic.

The door he was locking shuddered under a sudden blow. “Ratchet!” said an unfamiliar voice outside, high, desperate, a refined accent. “Ratchet, let me in, we have only hours if not minutes!”

Megatron opened the door and stared.

There was a Senator in the alley. A Senator who shoved past him with a bundle in his arms. Ratchet came stumbling out, bleary-opticked, yawning. Stopped when he saw the visitor. “Shockwave? What the frag?”

“We don’t have time,” said Shockwave again. “Some of my outliers grabbed this. We can’t let their next nominate get it, Ratchet, we can’t let them have that legitimacy. Someone needs to take it, and I think Megatron’s the best bet.”

“What?” said Ratchet, plainly horrified, as Shockwave shucked off the coverings of the thing he carried.

Megatron knew what it was the other mech held, and shock froze him in place a long moment. “You must be joking,” he said softly, and the Senator shook his helm.

“No,” he said. “They want someone we can control. You can’t be controlled, we all know that, with all they’ve done. Quickly mech, or do you want all you’ve suffered to go to waste?”

Megatron’s gaze dragged down to the Matrix of Leadership. It pulsed calm blue light at him, almost as if it were a spark itself. “What do you mean?”

“You’re more than you are now. You were more. Your words inspired every Cybertronian alive. Your words scared them, and for that, they mutilated you. This is healing. This is your chance. With this, Megatron, you will be a dangerous mech indeed.”

A dangerous mech indeed. He didn’t know if he wanted it. His processor still whirled.

“There is no need to fear,” said Shockwave, not unkindly. “It may not want you. And if you do not want it, by every indication, it will know. But we must try. What you could be—what you could mean, for all of us—it cannot be measured. Why do you think we have tried to keep you safe? Why do you think Ratchet first kept an optic on you? No one has done what you have done, Megatron. No one will do what you *will* do.”

He hesitated still, looking down at the little Senator before him.

“Remember Terminus,” said the Senator.

His spark blazed up, hurt and rage together. “What do you need me to do?”

“Kneel,” said Shockwave, smiled a little wryly. “It will be difficult to reach you as it is. And if it takes, the fall will be less unpleasant.”

He did, awkwardly.

“Open your chestplates.” Shockwave looked aside. “It will need to feel your spark.”

He took a long vent and did. His sparklight flickered out into the room, and he abruptly felt a fool, making himself so vulnerable before someone he didn’t know.

“Thank you,” said Shockwave, and opened his hands.

The Matrix hung where it was a long, long moment, then moved toward him. Megatron drew in a harsh vent, only just stopped himself from covering his exposed spark with a hand. He didn’t like the way it seemed to be regarding him. It had no optics, but he felt an assessing gaze sweep over his frame as surely as if another mech stood in the room.

He had only another vent worth of misgiving before it was directly before him. No flight mechanisms, no visible anti-gravs, nothing. It floated there, as if it were waiting for something.

It means to accept me, he thought. *It means to accept me, and it’s letting me make the choice.* He wasn’t sure why he thought that, only that it arrived with painful conviction, brilliant in his mind as if the thing before him had said it clearly.

He considered it. Considered Terminus, considered Drift, considered what Overlord had done, what the city looked like, his memories of the mines.

He did not want this. Spark-deep, he did not want this.

What he did want demanded that he accept it. Freedom, justice, equality, mercy, decency—if such things were to be in their world, he had to accept this.

One vent, two, and he inclined his helm. “Yes,” he said aloud, and offlined his optics.

He did not see it move into his frame, but he felt it, felt the light touch of it around his spark.

This is wrong! something said within him. *You are all wrong, you are not as you should be!*

A moment of confusion, and the pain burst over him.

His hands, medic sensitive, screamed agony at him as they twisted, re-formed, claws bursting from their tips. His dentae ached, he tasted energon as fangs lengthened, gouging soft tissues, and deep within him things wrenched and changed. He was on his knees, heard his own voice from a distance rise in a scream.

Pain seared through his helm, his brain, his optics. He gasped, ragged and frightened, smelled burning paint, felt his shoulder pauldrons reshape, dull pain.

His optics shattered, burst outward, he tasted their burnt fluids in the back of his mouth, and his world went dark, the pain so great it wasn't quite pain anymore. There were no words for this agony, no words for what this was, the feeling of struts twisting and changing and—

—suddenly nothing, suddenly floating dark and silence and within his mind Megatron stilled and listened, because something was coming, something important—

—all at once, all at once, they returned.

The darkness filled with words. Filled with anger, and with words. *His* words.

Megatron floated in the darkness and laughed with joy, laughed as he hadn't since he came online, and reached for the streamers of words like a curious protoform, the protoform they had never allowed him to be. The words slipped through and around his fingers, twining like friendly animals.

Did you miss me too? he wondered, still laughing, and they came to him, curled tight around him, and with them came comforting sleep.

Chapter 35

Megatron stabilized quickly, but it didn't stop Ratchet from darting a look of pure hate over his prone form at Shockwave.

"He was just beginning to build a life again, you fragger," he snarled. "Friends. Do you know how much that took, after what they did? After what they fragging tried to do?" He checked the energon line running into Megatron's neck, and wrinkled his nasal ridge at the smell that rose from him. Burning optics had a stink all their own. He'd cleaned the sockets and replaced them with the only ones to hand—red. He hoped it wouldn't arouse any unpleasant memories.

Primus knew how the poor fragger was going to operate with those claws, though. Ratchet had a whole new set of cuts just from handling them.

"I do," said Shockwave, arms folded tight around himself. "And when they catch me, it's going to be even worse for me. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that Sentinel won't become Prime, and what matters is that we have a Prime, a true Prime, who will fight for all Cybertronians, who already knows what the Functionists will do, and who won't be cowed by it. He'll be the saving of us all, Ratchet. Of that much, I am certain."

Ratchet bristled, remembering Megatron cowering in the corner with his hands clamped over his head, the back of his neck. His terror and determination throughout the medical academy. His agony at losing Terminus. The way Overlord had looked at him.

"You didn't consult him," he snapped.

"The Matrix did," said Shockwave. He looked at Ratchet a while, shook his head sadly. "Thank you. And...I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to," said Ratchet.

A wry smile flitted across Shockwave's face. "It's not enough, for him. And for you—I still do owe you an apology. Because I chose right. You're the best protector he could wish for." He drew a harsh vent, moved forward as if he meant to touch Megatron, then stopped, hand upraised. He slowly lowered his hand, as if he'd just realized he would be committing sacrilege. As if Megatron's plating was something he wasn't worthy to touch.

"Keep him alive," he said softly. "Keep him online, however you can. We need him. We can't lose him. Ratchet, I hope you understand what I'm asking you for. I hope you realize what I've done to you—not him, but to both of you. And for that, I'm sorry."

Ratchet could only blink at him as he nodded, and stepped out the door, paused.

"Thank you," he said. "And Ratchet...I'm sorry. I know it won't cover it, but I don't expect I'll be seeing you again. Remember me as I was?"

There was a funny sound to his voice, almost breaking, and then he stepped out into the night and was gone.

Ratchet put a protective hand on Megatron's shoulder, and stared at the door a long time after it had closed behind Shockwave. He supposed that his decision regarding Pharma had been made for him.

In a way, he was relieved.

He was strapped to a slab, and he couldn't move.

His hands were gone. The stumps ached. There was tugging, pulling. He could not look down; he had no optics with which to do that. He could not scream, though he wanted to more than anything. He had no vocalizer, no mouth, and the people working on him laughed softly.

He stood in a busy square, head thrown back, breathing in and tasting the scents of the air with delight, newly forged, happy, an important job to get to, but a handful of minutes to spare, and he spun on the spot, filled with joy and delight.

The pain of crushed legs and backstrut, terror, feeling the dampness under him grow steadily, and he was going to die here, now, half under a building.

Deep exhaustion. This was an unbearable life. For a moment he contemplated a crevasse, wondered if the deep places of this planetoid were enough to kill even a Cybertronian.

He gasped in ecstasy, backstrut arching, and his lover chuckled into his audial and shifted him ever so slightly in his lap, still pistoning up into him. The change in position hit all the nodes he desired, and he screamed his overload, clutching the other mech's thighs.

Swirling a cube of energon, admiring the refraction of the supplements within it.

A kiss, hard and biting. He didn't know if he wanted it.

Pain. Pain pain pain pain please let it end please please please—!

Incredible boredom. The inside of a prison cell could only entertain you so much.

First sip of coolant after a hot day of labor. He looked up at their progress—the housing block was coming along nicely.

He stubbed his pede against a stone and leapt back, cursing. That had hurt!

The pride of looking down at his unit. They'd drilled and drilled and drilled, hours of marching, and now it paid off. The Senate had been impressed!

He sat flat on his aft in his laboratory, gingerly reaching to check if he still had a face. He had to make a note not to combine those at room temperature.

He sat almost collapsed in an alley, staring at his claws. He wanted his hands back. He'd had a life, once.

He wasn't sure what he'd taken, but he didn't feel good. This didn't feel like Syk, and when he purged, it definitely didn't taste like it either. He was getting scared—he could feel himself cooling, condensation gathering on his plating. He shook, and he thought his spark was spasming.

These are your people, something whispered to him, coiling around him, clutching him like a lover. I give them to you; they are your charge, your responsibility. Feel their joy and their pain, their ecstasy and their sorrow, their delight and their uncertainty. You are Prime. You are theirs above all.

It hurt. Megatron didn't like it, didn't like feeling as if his entire spark had been made public, didn't like the invasion of alien feelings. But he accepted it. There was no other way forward.

For a better world, he thought at the Matrix, and dove back into the maelstrom. After all, whatever else he was, Ratchet had trained him to be a healer. To heal, he needed to diagnose first. And to diagnose, he needed to pay attention to the patient, no matter what conclusions he'd already come to.

Drift meant to return to the clinic. He really did. He only needed to get a few things first.

But there were Enforcers swarming all over the Dead End. It wasn't like they were actually Overlord, he wasn't nearly as scared of them, but he still had no plans to tangle with them.

No, the problem came when he overheard what they were talking about.

“—you sure he's in the clinic? That's a popular place. We don't want to shut it down without really good reason.”

“Certain. Do as you're told.”

Drift stiffened in horror. He thought about the route he'd taken, about all the various maneuvers he'd had to make around them, and went cold. The clinic was surrounded. There was nothing Ratchet could do even if he did get there ahead of the Enforcers.

But there was someone who could help. Someone powerful.

Drift flipped himself into alt and went to find Orion.

His vision fuzzed and spat sparks. Static. Resolved, slowly, into pixelated black and white, then, still more slowly, recognizable color.

He was lying on a slab and everything hurt. Ratchet loomed into view, looking drawn and worried.

“All right, kid. Let's see if I wired those in right. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Four,” said Megatron. “And two of them aren't yours.”

Ratchet made the noise that was as close as Ratchet got to a chuckle when someone was gravely injured, and withdrew the hand and the prosthetic fingers. “Good. Can you tell me your name?”

“Megatron,” he said, and felt himself smile. Something bright and fierce flared up in him. “I am Megatron of Tarn.”

Ratchet's eyebrows went up. “More or less,” he said. “I think the sticklers are going to be calling you Megatron Prime, though.”

Megatron slowly lifted his hand to his chestplates, and winced as a light touch of the talons there scratched the metal. He withdrew it, turning it over. “How am I supposed to work with these?” he asked, then looked down and startled still more badly. Aside from an irregular patch of red over his spark, two more on his abdomen, a touch here and there at the joints of his arms, his medic's paint

had been burned away, leaving him with gray metal.

Ratchet silently held up a mirror and he winced at suddenly seeing red optics instead of blue.

“I look like myself again,” he said, then wryly, “No hi-viz tape, though.”

“Yes, apparently the Matrix had opinions on its bearer’s appearance,” grumbled Ratchet. “It could have done it a bit less dramatically. We’ll figure out something with the claws, though. Watch out for them, they’re sharper than they look.”

“I wonder why it thinks I need them,” murmured Megatron, examining them more closely. “If I’m to save people...”

The door shuddered under a blow.

Ratchet stepped back, horror in his eyes before Megatron could even ask the question. At the same moment, he realized he didn’t need to.

He knew who was on the other side of that door. He didn’t need the shouts that followed. And he didn’t need someone to tell him they were already surrounded.

He flexed his claws, slid his aching frame off the slab, and put himself between it and Ratchet.

“I see,” he said quietly, and waited.

Chapter 36

Ratchet was trying not to stare. Megatron's voice had changed, become still deeper, more resonant. He'd had a pretty good voice to start with, and he'd been good at using it to calm patients. Now, even with the Functionists breaking down the door, Ratchet found it was calming *him*.

Still, he couldn't let Megatron do this alone. "You just got off a medical slab, idiot," he snapped. "Who do you think you're going to fight?"

Megatron glanced over his shoulder and smiled, grimly. "Anyone who's intending to injure either of us."

Ratchet shook his helm, let out a huff of a vent. "Kid, if this goes the way I'm pretty sure it will... I'm proud as Pit of you. You've done everything anyone could expect, and more."

Megatron's expression softened for a moment. "That means a lot," he said. "Especially coming from you."

The door burst in.

From what little Ratchet saw—and it wasn't much, it wasn't *long*—Megatron fought surprisingly well, already adapted to the use of those huge razor-sharp claws. He also fought refreshingly dirty, and with a spark-deep dedication, and a simply unfair knowledge of Cybertronian anatomy.

What he didn't have, however, was experience.

Which was why they both wound up cuffed and on the ground within about a minute of the door being broken. The guards—Senate guards, Ratchet noted grimly—took particular pleasure in clamping an inhibitor claw to Megatron's back and neck as he spat curses at them.

They kept them there, waiting, as the others searched the clinic, and then someone sent a signal.

Trepan walked through the doors, needles already out and a smile on his face. "Well, well, well. Look at what we have here."

Megatron stared sullenly up at him, and said nothing.

Another mech followed. It was two horrified blinks before Ratchet realized who it was—Senator Proteus, in person.

"Scan him," said Proteus, with a sharp gesture at Megatron.

One of the Senate guard complied, then nodded. "It's there, sir."

Proteus made a face. "So Shockwave did manage to find a bearer. How inconvenient. Megatron, wasn't it?"

"Megatron of Tarn." It was a growl, seething with rage.

"Trepan, take care of it."

Megatron growled again, and Ratchet caught a glimpse of his face. He didn't look so much angry as scared now, staring up at Trepan.

“No,” he tried, out loud. “No, don’t—you could kill him, Trepan, I saw what you already did to his brain!”

No one listened. Megatron’s shoulders were seized, pressed down, his helmet wrenched off, the beautiful, delicate flanges that protected his brain pried up out of the way. He made a small high sound of pain at that, tried to get away, and another guard seized his head and neck and held them still.

Trepan advanced, flicking his needles in and out of his fingers, a lazy smirk on his face. “I’ll just do the wipe I should have done to start with. Take the edge off your intelligence, make you respect the status quo. Much better traits in your new position. Though you’ll need a new name, a rebuild. We won’t have to acknowledge your lowly background.” *Flick flick.* Trepan’s grin widened. “And after I’m through with you, you won’t have to even remember it.”

“No!” A harsh gasp, Megatron tried to struggle and couldn’t, and Ratchet could see the beginnings of optic fluid gathering over his lenses.

Trepan caressed his cheek, tipped his chin up, smiling like a lover, and plunged his other hand into Megatron’s brain.

Megatron screamed.

For a moment nothing happened. Nothing seemed to happen. Ratchet’s tank lurched sickly, as he thought of how far he and Megatron had come, how hard Megatron had worked, and now it was all being taken away again. If anyone had earned a happy ending, it would be him, and yet—

Brilliant electrical charge flashed around Megatron’s chestplates, white edged in blue, and seethed up Trepan’s needles, his arm. Trepan screamed too, yanked his hand away.

When he held up his hand, staring at it, Ratchet realized why.

His needles had been burned to molten slag.

“I can’t...” he said, actually terrified. Looked at Proteus, as if for help. “I can’t shadowplay him, sir. I can’t. The Matrix won’t let me.”

Proteus stepped forward. “Too bad. It would have been neater. Guards, kill him.”

“No!” Ratchet surged forward. “Proteus, there’s another way. You’re throwing away a valuable asset—don’t!”

Megatron had sagged over himself, gasping, couldn’t seem to hear what Ratchet was saying.

“What do you mean?”

“If you keep him online, if you let him ascend as Prime, it’ll silence the critics,” said Ratchet. “It’ll show that you are willing to give him a chance. It will make them feel they’ve got someone, someone who’ll answer to them. It’ll calm them, Proteus, when otherwise Shockwave disappearing, him disappearing, would send them into a frenzy. And there are ways to control him.”

“Don’t listen to him,” snapped Trepan. “That’s what got us this mess in the first place.”

“I’m listening,” said Proteus.

“Let him be Prime. You’ll have control over him every hour of the day. And there’s always Terminus.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said Trepan. “He’s lying. Just kill him, now!”

“No,” said Proteus, slowly. “I like the medic’s idea. Terminus...who’s that?”

“His lover. All but conjunx endura. With him, Megatron will do anything you want. You don’t have to kill him.”

“Turning the people’s hero into the very thing they fought.” Proteus smiled. “I like that.” He looked at Megatron. “It seems like your friend just saved your life. What do you say to that?”

Megatron stared at Ratchet, mute, horrified, frozen.

Proteus kicked him with a small, brilliantly painted foot. “You say thank you, you uneducated lout.”

Ratchet closed his eyes.

“We’ll take him with us,” said Proteus. “As for you...”

“He needs me,” said Ratchet. “He just recovered, he needs someone to look after him.”

Proteus shook his head. “You’ll be remanded to the custody of your conjunx,” he said. “Pharma, at least, is a good loyal citizen.”

“No!” said Megatron, and was kicked again for his pains. They dragged him to his feet, even as someone uncuffed Ratchet and helped him stand. The guards closed in around him, leaving Ratchet with one on each elbow. Too big and strong for him to fight, but he tried anyway. “Megatron!”

His reaching hand was seized, dragged down, and he had a glimpse of Megatron’s frightened, angry face between the guards before they were out the door and gone.

“I’m sorry, kid,” he said softly. They marched him out onto the street as well, dragged him to a safe distance as the local Enforcers closed in on the clinic.

When they’d finished searching it, they burnt it to the ground. Ratchet watched, and wasn’t sure whether his spark was breaking over that, or Megatron.

It was almost a relief to be out of sight of Ratchet. It was *easier*. Now he had to worry about his own survival, not Ratchet’s as well.

He jerked his helm up, forced himself to walk proudly and stare straight ahead. Unfortunately, some of his guards took this as a challenge.

“Just wait,” sneered one. “Once they finish finding out how you got that bauble, they’re not gonna care what happens to you.” Something brushed his thigh. “Who knows, if you’re good, you might get to come with us.”

Megatron felt a curious sort of double-vision; half of him recoiled in disgust and fear of the guard, but the other was quite calm. *See, it said. This is what the Functionists turn us into. Is he so different from you? Yet here he is, threatening you with the foulest of crimes with no provocation, because he can. Because they have, for a breath of time, given him power over you. Given that, he pulls you down too, when if you but stood on each other's shoulders, you would both be freed. Why? Because to him, you have stepped out of place. You have become something more. In reaching, you betrayed him.*

At his lack of reaction, a hand seized his aft in an assured, painful grip, and the guard's vents were very loud in his audial. "Too good for me, huh?"

Megatron turned his helm to look at the guard, careful and assured. "What did they do to you?" he asked softly. Confusion. He felt himself smirk. "What did you want to be, once upon a time? What *were* you, before they laid your future out before you?"

The guard's faceplate went slack with horror, fear. He glanced around. "Shut your mouth, shareware."

"*Who* were you?" pressed Megatron, watching the guard's fear with pleasure. "You could have been more and they took it from you and you know it."

The hand on his aft loosened, but for a moment he was certain the guard would strike him. "Shut up!"

He turned his helm to one of the others in his escort. "And you? What did you want to be? Really?"

The guard snarled at him, dentae bared. "If you don't want us to just kill you—!"

"An engineer," said a calm voice. Megatron's head whipped around. The head of the guard detail had paused, looking back over his shoulder at them. Small, slender, black and white with red and blue highlights. Two sensory horns, one to either side of his helm, a handsome face and blue visor.

"Now, don't antagonize the nice mecha with the guns, Megatron Prime, sir," said the mech, with mockery in his tone. Megatron's lips lifted from his dentae with outrage at the condescension. "Cooperate and you won't be harmed."

"As if I'd follow orders from you," snapped Megatron.

He stiffened as an unknown contact established itself in his comm suite, with an attached message: *I only have one order for you: Survive.*

"Meister, come on, can't we teach the upstart a lesson? He's a brute, no one'll notice."

"Orders are orders. They said unharmed. Pick up the pace and quit talking with him if you're so worried."

Megatron shuffled along with them, angry, still frightened, confused by Ratchet's pleas, but with the dawning realization that he might just have an ally.

Chapter 37

“Oh no,” said Drift, and snatched at Orion’s wrist. “We’re too late.”

Orion didn’t want to agree. Orion wanted to deny it. He couldn’t. The clinic was already a charred husk, and there was no sign of either Ratchet or Megatron among the milling Senate guards. His hands balled into fists, he felt his lips skin back from his dentae, and he made an aborted step forward—aborted because Drift latched onto his arm like a space barnacle, both arms wrapped tight around it, claws digging in, and dug in his heels.

“I can’t fight,” Drift informed him, sounding grave and worried and determined. “At least, not good enough to take them. And I don’t think you can either, so I’m not gonna let go of you. Your decision whether to drag me into it.” And he squeezed his optics shut.

Orion looked down at him, perplexed. “Why are you trying to stop me?”

“Because you’re not gonna survive, and I’m not losing you as well as both of them today,” snapped Drift. “They cared about you, you stupid fragger.”

Orion stared at the burning wreck that had been Ratchet’s clinic, that had been the symbol of *hope* for all of them, and closed his optics. Walking away felt *wrong*.

“You’re powerful,” Drift whispered against his arm. “You’re their hope, our hope, don’t fragging throw it away.”

Orion froze a few moments more, before his shoulders slumped. “You’re right,” he said quietly, and hated himself for it.

Pharma... was surprisingly pleasant.

He received Ratchet at the door with an expression that looked more sad than anything else, held it open for him. Said, “I’ll have something waiting for you when you’re out of the washracks,” and let Ratchet go on his way unimpeded.

He didn’t seem to notice Ratchet’s involuntary flinch when he closed the door, though.

Ratchet washed up, dried off, all the while feeling as if he were distant from his own frame, watching through another’s optics. His hands didn’t shake.

Pharma was waiting for him with a cube of energon. Carefully handed it to him, carefully curled his fingers around it and looked at him with concern. After a moment, he left and returned with a thermal insulator, which he tucked around Ratchet’s shoulders—again, not noticing the flinch.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said. “I know how much it meant to you. I know I didn’t approve of it but really, Ratchet, I am so sorry. They shouldn’t have just taken it from you. I’m sorry.”

Ratchet drank his energon mechanically, and did not respond.

They came for him in the middle of the rest cycle. Terminus was just lucky enough to get wind of it and hide before they found him, jamming himself into a utility closet, venting hard.

His prosthetics had been holding up. He'd found a friend and protector in this facility, a big purple and yellow mech named Impactor, who'd brightened up the instant he'd heard Megatron's name, said, "Anything for one of his friends," with unusual warmth, and hadn't left Terminus's side since. Of course something was due to go wrong.

It hadn't taken much guessing that Impactor and Megatron had been lovers; Impactor wasn't exactly one for subtlety. But he was loyal, he did still care about Megatron without being jealous, and that was just what Terminus needed.

"You should go," he'd told Impactor. "They will find me, it's just a matter of time. You can still walk away from this just fine."

Impactor snorted. "Look, if you're right? Megatron's gone and rattled some important fragger's throne. No way am I making taking him down any easier. No way am I letting them grab you and use you like a tool. Not a chance in Pit." And he grinned, stuffed Terminus in the closet, and stalked off down the hall.

Terminus curled himself small and waited.

As he'd predicted, they found him eventually. It took hours, even longer than he'd expected, but the doors burst open and someone dragged him out by the collar fairing. He got a brief glimpse of Impactor, bloody and sullen, before he was shoved to the ground and his wrists cuffed behind him.

A familiar face loomed before him, one of his handlers while Megatron had been at the academy. The one who'd threatened him with the smelting pit. "Still doing your work through others, Terminus?"

Terminus managed a sneer. "Of course. He was easy to persuade to make a little cover for me. Not much use otherwise."

The mech snorted. "Nice try. Your accomplice is going to spend a few decades in prison for being taken in by you. If you're very lucky, you might join him. Otherwise..." He shrugged, then grinned. "Come on," he said to the rest of the guards. "Trepan doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Terminus cast a desperate, apologetic look over his shoulder at Impactor. Impactor saw him, gave him a short, jerky nod, before they were separated. Terminus looked grimly ahead.

He didn't know whether to be proud or terrified. If Trepan wanted him back, it meant that Megatron had remembered something, *done something*, that had terrified Trepan into needing another way to control him. That could only be good.

However horrific the future it spelled for both of them.

Terminus shuttered his optics briefly. *Whatever it was, my love, I hope it was something worthwhile.*

"Prowler, everything just went to Pit!" Jazz never sounded rattled, he made it a point, but he paced

as he made the call. He didn't want to take more than a handful of moments to do so. Even if Megatron was being guarded by people he could trust. He was terrified of coming back in to find a dead Prime. *Anyone*, even a half-trained medic, would be better than Sentinel.

He thought of Megatron, of both terror and determination in the other mech's optics, of his expression as he watched the clinic burn, of the way he had terrified the guards with quiet, reasonable questions. His spark went out to the mech. That was a mech he could follow, find hope in. He hated the idea of him dying for that courage.

"*I was aware of that,*" started Prowl. Jazz cut him off.

"What do I *do*?"

A brief low debate on the other end of the line, then a new voice cut in. Jazz stiffened; he'd never heard this voice before.

"*Keep him safe,*" it said. "*Get him away from them as soon as you can. This is an opportunity to allow them to expose themselves like never before, and you're correct; Sentinel must never be allowed to be Prime. Keep Megatron safe. He carries the hope of us all.*"

"Who the frag are you?" snapped Jazz, giving up on the 'not rattled' thing for good. "Prowl, who the frag is that?"

A pause. Then, "*My name is Dominus Ambus.*"

A thousand questions sprang to Jazz's mind, including why the frag Prowl was palling around with a political dissident. But now was not the time. Nor the place. He trusted Prowl completely. Dominus Ambus? Unlikely to be a trick. The Senate didn't think he was a problem. And they were very, very unlikely to try and get someone to protect poor Megatron.

And maybe, he thought, just *maybe*, this meant someone had goaded Prowl into fragging *doing* something.

"Will do," he said, and cut the connection.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Megatron had been bracing for pain when they delivered him to his cell.

Which looked surprisingly like a detailing shop, and turned out to actually *be* a detailing shop when the attendants emerged. About an hour later, thoroughly scrubbed and buffed and with some snotty towerling tracing lines that tickled onto his faceplate with a tiny brush, Megatron was *wishing* for pain. Torture, hacking, he'd encountered before. He could bear those.

This just made him uncomfortable and confused and irritated. Worse still, it made him feel like *one of them*.

And if he needed something to make him purge, that was it.

As it was, his tanks roiled uneasily. First there had been the Matrix, adjustment and change enough. He was still angry at having lost his apprentice's insignia and the colors of a medic. He'd never asked for them, but by now he felt he'd earned them, and the Matrix had wiped them away. The new optics, dentae, and sharp claws, he could live with.

Now, though, he'd been polished to a mirror shine, pretty detailing stenciled onto his chest, scrollwork to either side of the patch of red paint the Matrix had left in the center of his chestplate. They'd painted his crest, put his helmet back in place, and painted red details on that. Now, they were decorating his faceplate, two jagged slashes of red down his cheeks, interrupted by his optics, continuing to vanish under his helmet.

He looked like something else, fierce, worrying, a bit feral.

He wondered what message Proteus and Trepan hoped his paint would convey. Untrustworthiness? Ferocity?

He let out a long vent, pulled his face away from the artisan's brush. "One moment," he said softly, making his voice gentle. Still, the little mech flinched. "I know you have your instructions, but could you do apprentice medic's insignia? Here and here?"

"I could," said the artisan, uncertain. "But I had strict instructions..."

Megatron gave him a small, sad smile. "I know. It's all right if you cannot. It's only...I worked hard for them, and I want my friend, if he's watching, to see them and be proud."

The artisan hesitated, stepped back. His visor contorted in thought, before he reached quickly for a stencil and applied it to Megatron's shoulder. Megatron felt himself smile again. "Thank you."

He wondered if it would be too much to ask for a few high-vis markings.

It probably would.

When he'd been painted, the guards cuffed him again and led him to a small room. This was more what he'd expected, particularly when they secured his cuffs to the wall behind his back. He sat on the narrow bench where they'd put him and cycled his optics to deal with the darkness. Now just to wait.

The Matrix reached for his spark, tentative and comforting. *You just want me calm to do your bidding*, he thought bitterly at it.

It ignored him. Ghosts of memory touched his spark, pain, fear. All the horrors of the Functionist regime. The Matrix was delighted. It had found the right champion, someone who'd suffered as badly as anyone under them.

The Matrix, Megatron noted wryly, didn't exactly have the best history of keeping its champions alive. Even he, with the barest of education scrounged from whatever datapads he could get his servos on, could count dozens of stories of the horrible demises of Primes past, sometimes at the hands of their own governments. Being thrown alive into smelting pits was the least of it.

But at the spark of it, he and the Matrix had the same goal, a free Cybertron. And if he had to die to accomplish that—well, it was a price he'd accepted long ago, and without the assistance of anything so illustrious as the Matrix.

He would do whatever was necessary.

Even if it offlined him before he saw another sunrise.

The door slammed open, jolting him out of his reverie.

"Here are the terms," said Trepan, putting a datapad on Megatron's knee. It forced him to bend his head to read it, exposing the back of his neck to Trepan. One of Trepan's little games, no doubt—but he could do nothing now and Megatron took pleasure in acting like it didn't bother him.

It was a speech.

He couldn't give that speech.

It was everything the Functionists stood for. Everything he stood against. If he were to live and be Prime, they'd take the spark of him. He looked back up at Trepan. "Don't be insulting," he said, and twitched his knee to send the datapad tumbling to the floor.

Trepan scooped it up. "We thought you'd say that," he said, and gestured at the door. A few of the guards came in. They unlocked him from the wall. "You see, we know you don't care much for keeping yourself safe, but you do seem to care for others." He flicked the needles out of his fingers. "And even though my right hand will be recovering for some time from your little fireworks show, this one still works."

"How nice for you," sneered Megatron, though something in him quailed. Ratchet had shouted something about Terminus, and he felt the shape of Trepan's plan in his mind, recoiled from it in horror. How could he make such a choice?

"Bring him," snapped Trepan.

They complied, dragging him along without even giving him the chance to stand. Down a hall, and to another room. Trepan unlocked the door. "Uncuff him," he said, and opened it.

Terminus was there.

Hands cuffed in front of him, a collar and chain securing him to the floor, battered, exhausted. He'd tried to shift his weight a little so his full mass didn't come down on his stumps, but it had only done so much. He looked drawn, older still than the last time Megatron had seen him.

“No,” he breathed, horrified, feeling something of his determination shatter.

“Let me make this very clear,” said Trepan. “You will cooperate. Or I will be given permission to do whatever I like to his mind. I’ll change him into the worst monster either of you could imagine. You’ll have to kill him yourself. You’ll *wish* you could kill him yourself, when I’m done. You will give this speech. You will behave, and obey, if you want him to stay whole, himself, anything but the shell I’ll turn him into. Do you understand me, Megatron?”

Megatron didn’t have words.

“Do you?” snapped Trepan.

“Yes,” said Megatron, slowly.

“Good,” purred Trepan. “Before you decide, we’ll give you a little time with him.”

One of the guards shoved him into the room and the door closed.

“Did they hurt you?” he asked, going to his knees before Terminus, tilting the other mech’s face up. Terminus met him halfway, a long, achingly sweet kiss, everything he had longed for.

“I’m all right,” said Terminus.

“Terminus, I can’t—”

Terminus leaned his helm forward. “Hush. There’s nothing you can say that they won’t hear.”

He laced his fingers with Terminus’s, looked into the other mech’s face for some respite. *Please*, he thought, even as the Matrix screamed at him in protest, that the lives of all he served were more important than this one mechanism. *Please, ask me to be selfish just this once.*

There was no mercy there. Terminus looked back, full knowing, calm and controlled. He heard the door open behind him, Trepan make a noise of impatience.

The Matrix flared against his spark, a reminder of pain, of anger, of sparks snuffed. Of what the Functionists were. Of what they would do with a Prime doing their bidding. Megatron drew a harsh vent, steeling himself, feeling his face harden. He looked Terminus in the optics, knowing that, for their people, for the sake of Cybertron, he had no other choice.

Terminus’s hand tightened in his. “I know,” he said.

Megatron nodded, tight and controlled. Pressed the hand to his intake, kissed it. Then rose and turned from the room.

“Well?” asked Trepan, as the door shut behind him.

“I will cooperate. Please, don’t kill him.” The lie came too easily. Trepan believed it. He saw the golden optics narrow in satisfaction. Oh, they thought they had him. They thought him too kind to allow his beloved to die, hideously, for the sake of defiance.

They knew neither him nor Terminus.

He took the datapad with the speech he was to give, made a show of reading it, nodded his agreement. Trepan believed him. The Functionists would believe Trepan. Until it was too late.

He wondered what they would do to him, after they realized that threats against Terminus had no

effect. He wondered if he might escape, if the Matrix might shield him from further shadowplay. He didn't know.

But there was nothing else to do.

He turned the words of *his* speech over in his processor, the speech he knew full well would ignite a war. The speech that existed nowhere but his processor. He dared not trust it to a datapad. He vented hard, and stepped out onto the balcony, into the glare of lights and cameras.

"They told me to give this speech," he said to the crowd below. "The Functionist Council threatened me, gave me this," he raised the datapad over his helm, "because they thought me their pet."

He clenched his hand, medic-sensitive, miner-strong, and the datapad shattered.

"I am Megatron Prime," he said. "*And you are being deceived.*"

Terminus knew that when that door opened next, he would be killed. That didn't stop him from smiling when Trepan stormed in, fear and anger seething through his field. The smaller mech stopped, visibly collected himself. "Your lover has betrayed you," he said, and for all his assumed calm, his voice trembled. "Do you care to say anything to him before you pay the price of his defiance?"

"Yes," said Terminus, and bared his dentae. "Good job."

"Do you think this is a game?" snarled Trepan, surging forward, needles flicking out of his fingertips.

"No," said Terminus. "No, but you *did*. Until he gave that speech. And now—how does it feel, Trepan? The ground slipping out from under your pedes, and you hear it coming for you. The shouts, the rage, the hatred... The mob's at your *door*, doctor, and it wants energon now. You can kill me. You can mutilate me. You can turn me into whatever kind of monster you like. But that won't stop it. Do you hear the beast howling? Do you hear it creeping closer? It's coming for you, Trepan. It won't stop."

There was very real fear in the mnemosurgeon's optics, slipping out of control. Terminus leaned in, as much as he could with the restraints. Lowered his voice to a whisper. "And when it does find you, Trepan... Megatron will be leading it."

Trepan made a sound between a gasp and a shriek and backhanded him hard across the face. "Shut up! Shut up!"

"Too late," said Terminus, laughing. "I've said all I needed to say."

He forced himself to laugh even as his helmet was wrenched off, as the needles slid into his brain, because the feeling of Trepan's terror somehow made it possible.

"I am Megatron Prime, and you are being deceived."

Orion's helm came up. Hope blazed through his lines between one vent and the next, his optics fixed on the figure standing on the balcony of the Primal Basilica, broad and tall and proud, the glittering shards of a datapad spilling from his fingers, optics blazing. He'd done it.

He hadn't dared *hope* Megatron could do it, but there he stood, defying the Functionists on their very doorstep, and the crowd was realizing what they'd heard, beginning to stir with determination and intent.

Primus. He looked at Megatron, at the defiantly lifted helm and the bared dentae, didn't hear Megatron's next words for the way his spark beat hard in his intake. *Primus, he might be able to do it. He might be what we needed.*

And then the bullet ripped through Megatron's chest. There was a half moment of surprise on his face, and then he dropped.

Orion came to his feet with a shout of denial.

And the crowd... the crowd went mad. There was a noise, greater than any one scream, the sound of a pained animal, and frames surged toward the Basilica, a moving wave heedless of those who dropped to the Council Guard's fire, a snarling mob of mecha. Hope. They'd had hope for a half-vent before it was snatched from them, and it was too much. It had snapped the tenuous web of control and fear and now there was nothing but revenge.

Orion knew. He felt it within himself.

Without Megatron, they needed direction. He had already taken up Megatron's mantle once, with his writings. Now, did he have a choice? He didn't know. He only knew that his spark could not bear this, could not bear turning back to meekly following, to merely writing. He only knew that his spark ached, knowing that hope lay bleeding from a sniper's blast. That he would not turn aside again.

"We will rise up," he said softly to the fritzing screen, the fires and the death. "This was not in vain. I will make sure of it."

Chapter End Notes

End part 2.

Echoes will be on hiatus for the next few weeks, as I have quite literally overrun my outline with this chapter.

Oh, and I have my prospectus to write. There's that too...

Act III

Two Years Later

“Are you sure about this?”

Prowl shifted his doorwings a little. “Yes,” he said. “I am very strongly concerned about the effects of this conflict on civilians; I believe I am needed at the civilian refugee center. Among other things, there’s a high likelihood that they will become Functionist targets.”

Optimus sighed, and resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nasal ridge. “We’ll just be sorry to be losing you.”

Prowl looked uncomfortable. “It’s not a particularly distant facility,” he said. “In an emergency I will be as available as always.”

Optimus reached out to put a hand on his shoulder. “I respect your decision,” he said. “I’m sure it’s the right one; I trust your judgement completely.”

Prowl nodded, coming to attention. “Thank you,” he said. “And Optimus...”

Optimus stiffened a little at the use of his name. Hearing his long-ago penname out loud felt strange, but he’d felt more people recognized him when he used it—and made the corresponding change to his name. He had to be a symbol for them, for this.

Prowl looked up at him, then, hesitating, put a hand on his forearm. “We do believe in what you’re doing. But make sure you always remember *why* you’re doing it.”

And if that wasn’t a veiled warning, Optimus didn’t know what was. He knew Prowl and the other former Enforcers among the Decepticons didn’t like working with criminals, were concerned about the use of violence. Optimus was as well, but his friendship with Drift—who’d renamed himself Deadlock, a few days after Megatron had fallen—and with the others of Overlord’s old enclave, had learned a very different view of their old foes.

“There’s one other thing,” said Prowl. He turned, and offered a datapad. “If you decide to act on this, ask Jazz to do it. He’s got the right touch.”

“Thank you, my friend,” said Optimus and accepted it.

Once Prowl was gone, he powered it on, and drew in a soft, sharp vent.

It was Ratchet’s location.

He put it down, and very slowly rested his helm in his hands, not sure if he was trembling with relief, or with guilt it had taken him so long to find Ratchet.

Yes, he would ask Jazz for help.

“He reacted pretty well, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well enough.”

“You’re not happy.”

“No.” Prowl straightened as another person passed them in the hall, face smoothing into an impassive mask. The disciplinary measures necessary to keep these mecha all aimed in roughly the same direction were wearing on him, the reports of atrocities, of planned atrocities, from the other side were exhausting, and their own people—

Well. He wasn’t happy that he was surrounded by people that wanted just as badly to commit the same atrocities and worse, should they get the chance. Optimus’s idealism was all well and good but there were some very simply evil mecha on their side, and he was tired of being the only thing between them and the rest of the world.

His mind kept trying to sort things into neat compartments, into usable boxes, and it made him feel sick. People shouldn’t be treated and used like weapons. There was right, and there was wrong, and if he functioned as Optimus’s second much longer, he’d start to lose sight of that. It was so easy to justify to himself, it was frightening.

He couldn’t go any further down that path.

“Hey,” said Jazz, stopping. “Prowler, you with me? I think you did the right thing. For you. And that’s important.”

“For me doesn’t matter as much as for them,” said Prowl quietly. “Most of our...Decepticons... haven’t seemed to realize exactly how much trouble we’re in. They’re only excited about the rebellion—about getting revenge for a lifetime of insults. They’re not *seeing* where we’re headed if we’re not careful, how *easily* this all could be crushed. I’m not sure even Optimus sees it. Removing myself from that equation may be a colossal error.”

“Not egotistical at all,” said Jazz, dryly. “Prowl, you don’t carry the weight of the cause on your shoulders alone. Taking care of the civilians targeted by the Functionists is just as, if not more, important than actively fighting them, and I don’t think anyone wants you fighting if you’re not certain of where we stand.” He put a hand on Prowl’s shoulder. “We’ve had this discussion a thousand times. We both agreed. This is the best thing we can do. Now stop raking yourself over the smelter about it, my mech.”

Prowl looked down. Jazz leaned forward and dropped a kiss in the center of his chevron.

“And if you think you were wrong, you can always go back. Turn command over the refugee camp to First Aid, or someone like him. But for now, this is for the best.”

Prowl let out a long breath, feeling something of his fear and tension leave with it. He patted Jazz’s shoulder, a brief touch, and managed a smile.

Jazz returned the smile and then, as if he couldn’t help himself, leaned forward and kissed him again. Prowl tilted his face into the kiss so his lips met Jazz’s and kissed back.

It was broken by Jazz’s comm going off. He gave Prowl an apologetic look and withdrew. “Yes?” he said aloud.

Then, “Holy frag, on my way.”

To Prowl’s quizzical look, he said, “They found Ratchet.”

Ratchet wished everything hadn't become so...so normal.

But everything was so much like it had been before he'd lost the clinic. And Megatron. Wake up, go to work. Come home. Grouse at Pharma, and be grouched at in turn, on a good day. The bad days were getting more frequent, just as expected, but there wasn't anything to be done about that. Pharma was legally obligated to keep an eye on him. That was what 'legally remanded to the custody of your mate' translated to in reality. Pharma was a member of the Functionist party in good standing; they were more than willing to grant him a little flexibility with a defiant mate. As long as said mate didn't make trouble.

After watching Megatron die, Ratchet didn't think he had it in him to make trouble anymore.

Mostly he wanted to avoid it. From Pharma or others. A parole officer—or someone who would have been called a parole officer, if he'd actually been arrested—came and spoke with Pharma from time to time. Pharma, so far, hadn't made good on any of his threats to report that Ratchet had misbehaved. Ratchet doubted he would. It would have meant giving up his power, and that Pharma wouldn't do.

He'd satisfied himself with other things, evidently. In the last few days, many of Ratchet's small, sentimental objects had vanished. It was certainly Pharma's doing. It could hardly be anyone else. Ratchet hadn't confronted him yet. He didn't see the point. They'd probably been destroyed by now.

Sometimes, Ratchet wished he could just be arrested and shadowplayed so he wouldn't have to remember things being otherwise.

He missed the clinic. He mourned Megatron, who had deserved better. And he seized on any bit of information about the rebellion—what idiot had decided to call them Decepticons, he'd like to know, though he suspected Orion—with carefully hidden eagerness. He knew he wasn't going to get to them. He was too deep in Functionist territory, too carefully watched. But knowing they existed was the iota of hope he needed to keep his spark spinning.

Hopefully Drift was among them. Kid deserved to have people looking out for him.

Ratchet staggered into the break room, exhausted. He just wanted to go somewhere and sleep forever. He wondered if Pharma might be persuaded to do energon prep for one evening, or if asking would provoke outrage and insult. It was hard to predict, these days.

One of the cleaning droids rammed his foot, hard enough to hurt. It wasn't supposed to be in here at this hour; Ratchet picked it up and frowned at it.

It beeped at him.

Ratchet's frown deepened.

It wasn't a standard sequence of beeps. It was a binary sequence, and it spelled a name.

A pause, and it repeated.

Orion.

The programming input button on the bottom blinked.

Ratchet looked around. He had the break room to himself. He turned it over and stared at the bottom. After a moment, he prodded it—then entered the sequence of his own name, short and long presses.

The cleaning droid blooped happily and tried to trundle out of his hands. He put it back down on the ground, and it scooted toward the maintenance closet. He followed.

He opened the closet for it. And a hand reached out of the closet, seized him by the arm, and dragged him inside.

Chapter 40

It was a thankfully quiet night.

Soundwave was still on edge.

Optimus was full of hope. That was good. Soundwave and Prowl were full of practicality, which currently translated to being full of worry.

Triply more so just now, with Prowl having taken his leave to run the refugee camp, and Jazz rescuing Ratchet. It left Soundwave as the only person here with a level head.

Soundwave wasn't recharging much these days.

And something about tonight seemed off.

Paranoia was healthy. It had kept him and his symbionts alive under Overlord; now it was going to keep him and the Decepticons alive.

Soundwave reached across the bond to Ravage, who was crouched among the ducting in the recreation room. Ravage reached back with amusement and reassurance, and jacked Soundwave into his audio/visual feed; several smaller mechs clustered around Black Shadow, who was preening under the attention.

Soundwave thanked him, disconnected, and checked Laserbeak and Buzzsaw as he paced back to his rooms. He was reaching for Rumble's feed when a crash startled him into stillness.

It had come from Optimus' quarters. Soundwave turned on a heel, calling all the cassettes to him over their bond. Optimus was not a clumsy or careless mech, and something tonight had Soundwave on edge.

It took him precious long moments to hack the door, but he was faster than the intruder had expected. He found a small orange mech crouched over Optimus, needles in the back of Optimus' neck. Optimus had stopped struggling, and Soundwave could see the reflected overbright flare of his optics in the window, faceplate retracted, intake gasping, helplessness and terror on his naked face.

The mech whirled to look at him, tried to disengage and flee, and Ravage raced between Soundwave's legs and caught the intruder by the arm. The intruder screamed, shook hard, and fled for the window. Soundwave gave chase.

He tackled the mech halfway between the window and the door, slamming him to the ground. "What did you do to him?" he demanded.

The small mech snarled at him, struggling. "As if I'd tell you!"

Soundwave steeled himself. He did not like his telepathic abilities. He did not have much practice with them, but of recent, he'd been drawing more heavily on them. It was that or admit every Functionist spy in the area to the ranks of the rebellion. Optimus was too trusting.

He had only a flash of impressions, a name – Trepan—before the little orange mech screamed and jammed his needles into Soundwave's wrist, where they did little good in terms of infiltrating his neural net but were extremely painful. Soundwave grunted, his grip on Trepan faltering. Trepan

wrenched away a second time, but Soundwave recovered himself, pushing himself upright and aiming his shoulder-cannon.

He didn't hesitate before firing. He wouldn't be able to catch the mech.

The bolt slammed between the mech's slim shoulders, tearing a hole through his torso bigger than his head. There was almost more hole than chest left, and it obliterated the mech's spark.

Trepan was dead before he hit the floor.

There was no information Soundwave could extract from a corpse. He left Trepan there.

Optimus hadn't moved, save to press his face into the floor and shiver. Soundwave knelt next to him, unsure of what to do. He'd seen a great many horrible things, but he'd never learned to deal with a shadowplay victim. They didn't show symptoms by the time they'd wended their way down into Overlord's hands; he'd never dealt with someone who'd been so immediately attacked, not that he knew of, and his hands shook as he touched Optimus' shoulders. "Optimus: can speak?"

Optimus groaned and slowly rolled over.

In the last year, Soundwave had fought side by side with Optimus. He'd seen Optimus wavering with exhaustion, with an arm shorn off by an explosion, punch-drunk after a one-on-one fight with an enforcer.

But what he saw on Optimus' face now was new, and it frightened him.

"Yes," said Optimus after a while. And then he reached, groping, for Soundwave's arm to clasp it in turn. "Yes, I think I'm all right. You...you interrupted him."

"Intruder. How did he arrive?"

Optimus sighed heavily. "He seemed to have gotten stuck on the ledge outside the window. I offered assistance, thinking he was another refugee."

Of course he had. Accustomed to the protection of his rank and frame, Optimus still hadn't come to grips with the fact he was a target, and that he couldn't necessarily defend himself without assistance. "Soundwave: will reassess security and increase."

Optimus let out a small vent. "Thank you, Soundwave. And thank you for not lecturing me."

The fact that he was managing to respond so cogently was encouraging. "Optimus: wants damage assessed?"

"I cannot say that I am looking forward to having someone else in my processor," said Optimus. "But... I think it would be best. It is not my safety alone that is at stake."

Soundwave bobbed his head in acknowledgement and reached out for his sense of Optimus. He felt Optimus flinch, both physically and mentally, and hesitated.

"It's all right," said Optimus aloud, and groped to catch Soundwave's hand in his own. "Go on. I need to know if I am a danger."

Soundwave reset his vocalizer and tried again.

He wished he could be more precise. He wished he could be more sure. But his sense of Optimus had not changed; he was hurt, certainly, but the pain seemed shallow. Trepan had been disrupted

well before he caused permanent harm. But it occurred to Soundwave that he would need to hone his abilities. Optimus was unlikely to be the first or the last victim of shadowplay among the Decepticons.

“Optimus: has no major damage Soundwave can detect.”

“Thank you.” Optimus slowly sat up. “I suppose this is a warning not to get too comfortable.”

“Yes.”

Optimus extracted his hand from Soundwave’s. “Again. Thank you.”

Soundwave did not feel he’d done nearly enough, and the nightmare of a fully-shadowplayed Optimus made him shudder. “No need,” he said, and rose to go.

Optimus followed. “I think I’ll go back to the offices. I don’t particularly want to spend too much time in this room just now.”

“Soundwave understands.” He looked at the corpse on the floor. “We will find someone to deal with the intruder’s remains.”

“Thank you.”

Neither of them seemed to know what to say after that. They walked back to the corner of the base they’d decided to call the administrative offices in silence.

“What the frag?”

“Shh!” A hand clamped over Ratchet’s mouth as the utility closet door closed. “Look, you were the only mech in there when I sent the cleaning droid out, but let’s not count on it staying that way.”

“Jazz?” Ratchet tried to ask, muffled by that hand.

“The one and only. We’ve got your stuff out of your apartment. Now it’s just you. Anything we forgot?”

“I thought that was Pharma,” said Ratchet.

“Nah, that was us. You want us to grab him as well?”

Ratchet’s brain screeched to a halt. He thought about the fallout of his escape for Pharma. He should bring Pharma with him. He *ought* to.

Ought to did not translate to *wanted* to.

He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want to make the decision. Both options seemed equally awful, equally difficult to get out of his vocalizer. Pharma might put all of them in danger, but could he leave him to the outrage of the Functionists?

He was angry at Pharma. Incredibly angry. Abandoning him was still not right.

“I see,” said Jazz quietly. “Okay. It’s my call. I’d rather pull you out, and be sure of pulling you out. Come on.”

He should protest.

He couldn't protest. He wanted this too much.

"This way," said Jazz, lifting his hand from over Ratchet's mouth and grabbing his arm instead. He pulled Ratchet deeper into the closet. There was a short series of beeps, as he entered a code, and Ratchet heard the click of a lock disengaging.

"The maintenance bots have their own infrastructure," said Jazz. "We'll be using that. You'll want to do this on your wheels; I don't know how long we've got before someone figures out what's up."

Ratchet nodded and complied, feeling stiff and reluctant. He was wrong for doing this. What would happen to Pharma? He could talk Jazz into going back...

Jazz put himself in gear and started at a sedate enough pace. Ratchet followed him, still torn. He wanted to escape. He hated his life here. And he was sick of dealing with Pharma. He'd meant to leave far earlier. He'd not intended to go back after the first time Pharma struck him, and he'd sworn to himself that he wouldn't be the sort of idiot who went back to a mech who hit him; he'd seen where that would go. But to leave Pharma to face the consequences of his escape, that wasn't right.

He'd just made up his mind to tell Jazz to go back when the alarms went off, Jazz hit the brakes to fall in behind him. "Drive faster!"

Ratchet did, but he wasn't as young as he used to be. Panic boiled in his tanks; what would happen to Pharma was pushed back in his mind, and fear for Jazz spurred him onward. He sped up by infuriatingly small increments, feeling heavy and slow compared to Jazz.

"Turn right," said Jazz, and Ratchet threw himself sideways. He heard the sound of a transformation behind him, then blasterfire.

He hesitated, worried he'd left Jazz behind, but Jazz nudged him hard in the bumper soon after. "Still here, Ratch, keep going. Left at the next turn."

There was still blasterfire behind them, blasterfire and yells, and Ratchet didn't dare turn to see what it was.

"Almost there. Left!"

Ratchet threw himself sideways, and then into root mode when Jazz yelled, "Transform," and took two stumbling steps before coming to a sudden halt. There was a waste disposal chute, wide, no railing, clear safety violation.

"And there's our exit," said Jazz, transforming next to him. He grinned, grabbed Ratchet around the waist, and jumped.

Ratchet yelped. The first bump against the chute's sides took a strip of paint off his side. The second banged a dent into his arm. Jazz was still holding onto him, and he felt a surge of irritation. Yes fine, it was a rescue, but he'd prefer not to be handled like a shipping crate.

Jazz's arm tightened around his waist, and their fall ended with an abrupt jerk. "All right," said Jazz. "There's going to be a handhold right in front of you. I'm going to need you to grab it; my hands are full with the grappling."

Ratchet looked for and found the handholds in question, a ladder set into the wall. He grabbed and hung on. “Is this all really necessary?” he grumbled.

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Jazz. “But we need you back, and I didn’t feel like taking chances, so we’re taking the creepy back route. Get your feet on there too. Yeah. Perfect. Ok, make you can support yourself there, then say the word and I’ll let go.”

“Got it.”

“Good.” Jazz’s arm released his waist. “The exit we’re looking for is above us. Climb up so I can get on the ladder.”

Ratchet grumbled at him, but remembered the sound of blasterfire and climbed.

Jazz, a quick glance back showed, was hanging from a grappling hook one-handed and grinning like a Sharkticon. That *did* make Ratchet roll his optics. “Primus spare me from youthful enthusiasm,” he said.

“Hey, you know what they say. Do what you love.” Jazz swung a bit, and joined him on the ladder with barely a thump, then freed his grapppler. “Let’s go. You’ll know it when you find it. After that, hopefully, it’ll be the end of the dramatics, though we’ve got you a nice recycling transport and pile of old parts to hide in.”

“Please tell me that was a joke.”

“Not a word of it. The entrance should be right above you.”

“Yeah, found it.” Ratchet groped around, hauled himself up. “You need a hand?”

“Nah, just make sure you’re not in the way. Thanks.” Jazz scrambled up next to him. “All right. Follow me, and we’re almost out.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” said Ratchet. With the exertion of the climb behind him, the guilt rolled in. Jazz saw his expression change and reached out.

“It was my call,” he said firmly. “Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

Ratchet looked away.

“We’ll see what we can do for him,” said Jazz. “Come on.”

He hurried Ratchet along the tunnel, then to a service exit. “Your chariot awaits,” he said with a grin, and Ratchet rolled his optics.

It was, indeed, a recycling truck.

This was going to be massively unpleasant.

Chapter 41

Prowl looked down over his desk at the minibot—emphasis on *mini*, the mech really was tiny—in front of it. “Name?”

“Minimus Ambus.”

“And your role?”

“I’m here to help you with the administrative issues of the refugee camp.” Minimus stood taller. “I am very good at administration, and I anticipate being of great assistance in keeping the conditions decent and in accordance with intergalactic code.”

“I would imagine Soundwave would be delighted with your assistance,” said Prowl.

Minimus frowned, looked away. “We had... differences of opinion,” he said. “The behavior of some of the Decepticon soldiers leaves much to be desired, and I expressed frustration at the lack of action taken to address it.”

Someone with similar sentiments to him. Prowl was pleased. “I see. We will find office space for you once we have time. In the meantime, please take those datapads and make sure all our requested supplies are accounted for.”

“Yes sir,” said Minimus, sounding *happy*, took the datapads, and went to work.

Starscream looked around the seminar room for help and found none. He hiked his wings up and set his faceplates in a sneer, fists bunching. “Do any of the rest of you *imbeciles* want to cast doubt upon my academic integrity?”

“Calm down, Starscream,” said one of the professors—incidentally, the same mech who’d just made the accusations. “It’s not a tribunal. We just want to know who helped you with this.”

“No one,” Starscream snarled, “helped me. It’s my data. I collected it. You signed off on the fieldwork expense reports. You *know* it was just me.”

The professor raised his hands. “We know you’re unusually good, Starscream,” he said. “It’s why you earned a degree from this institution in the first place, why we’re willing to have you here as a junior researcher.”

After no other institution would take me, thought Starscream bitterly. It was just his luck that those Functionist idiots had tightened regulations the year he’d received his degree.

“But these results are stunning, the paper well-organized. I think everyone here is familiar with your work. This is a step above and beyond, an incredible find—if it’s true.”

“It *is* true, the data there *supports it!*”

“Or you’ve done a very clever job of falsifying it,” said the mech, calm and reasonable, despite the fact that what he was saying might get Starscream thrown out of research for the rest of his function. And then what? The military? He wouldn’t last a week in the military. Taking orders

wasn't his strong suit, no matter how good a flyer he was.

Starscream folded his arms across his chest, buried his desperation and growing fear under complete and utter rage, and glared. "I falsified nothing."

"It's a revolutionary discovery," said someone else. "We have to be sure. Starscream, could you step out of the room, please?"

"I can't see that it'd make any difference," snarled Starscream. "You've already made up your minds." He drew himself up. "I have better things to be doing. Like revising this paper." He snatched up his datapads and stalked from the room.

"Please wait in the hall," called one of them.

Once in the hall, Starscream stood ramrod straight, glaring at the opposite wall. He'd spent ages revising the paper; he'd even lowered himself to consulting the campus writing tutors. He'd labored over it, he'd made sure every point was carefully supported. He'd learned long ago that his natural talent wasn't enough to get him through this, that simple brilliance wasn't enough to protect him. He was a flyer, someone who should have been military. There was no such thing as a second chance for him. He couldn't afford to make mistakes.

So he'd left, he'd done this research project, found a new, better way to collect energy and process it into energon from very close to stars (too close for safety, some said), a very efficient processes indeed, and then he'd spent the last year painstakingly putting it together into a paper. Every claim was supported. Every sentence cited. He'd labored for weeks over simple wording. He'd gotten a reputation for overenthusiastic flightiness, and he was determined to buck it.

Now they thought he'd falsified all of it.

Why was he even *trying*?

The door opened. "You can come back in now, Starscream."

He already knew what they were going to say. He debated just walking away, thought better of it. Slowly, he turned and stepped back into the room.

They stopped. Jazz knocked on the back door of the transport, and Ratchet stood up, *things* pattering off him and onto the bed of the transport, as he glared at the door.

Jazz caught the glare and laughed a little. "Well, it worked," he said.

"I'm covered in half-junked *spare parts*," snarled Ratchet. "These used to be in *people*."

"Well, yes." Jazz shrugged a little. "But you're a surgeon."

"Yes, well," said Ratchet, and dislodged something with a flick of a finger, "*burrowing around in a sea of spare parts* is not how I usually operate on people. Where were these headed?"

"Sorting plant. Figure out what can go to the clinics in the industrial districts, what needs to be melted down. On the upside, we're done with the truck. On the downside, this just stopped being a private rescue. Come on."

Ratchet ignored the hand and jumped down out of the bed of the truck himself, wincing as he

jarred his knees. He looked around.

Damned if he knew where he was. Some industrial district somewhere. Night, though it didn't look much like night. Smelting pools and machinery cast eerie glows on the undersides of the clouds.

"Hey!" someone shouted. Ratchet flinched, but the tone was cheerful; a small red, gold, and orange speedster came dashing up to them, a battered blaster strapped to his hip. "Good to see you. Right on time—everyone else is ready to go."

"You doing this yourself, Roddy?" said Jazz.

"We've got some VIPs," the speedster responded, turned and stuck out a hand to Ratchet. "Hey there! My name's Hot Rod, and I'll be your rescuer for this evening."

Ratchet, hesitating, took the hand.

"Not his only rescuer," said Jazz, sounding wounded. "I'm coming too."

Hot Rod glanced at him with something very near a pout, an expression just as quickly chased away. "The more the merrier."

"Who else have we got?"

"Lots of dissidents," said Hot Rod. "Did a prison break a week or so ago; most of them will be with us. I think mostly for Prowl's refugee camp. Then just a few stupid kids who showed up where they shouldn't have, some people running from the draft, the usual."

You're not much more than a kid yourself, Ratchet thought, and didn't say.

"Hey, are you a medic?"

"Yes."

"Oh good." Hot Rod led them to yet another transport, this one larger and more tattered than the last. "I've got a medical kit but frankly, most of these guys are past my skill level." He laughed. It wasn't really a laugh, more of a noise to defy the horror of the situation. He opened the door. Jazz helped Ratchet in.

"I'll be up front with Roddy," he said quietly, and pressed the medical kit into Ratchet's hands. "We have to get moving now, but if you can do anything—well, Roddy tends to rescue the strays in the worst condition. It's more than they'd get on the trip otherwise."

And he sealed up the door. Ratchet turned around, flicking his headlights onto their lowest setting.

Scared faces looked back at him, undamaged and empurata victims alike. Ratchet looked them over, a vast array of Cybertronian misery, and sighed. "All right," he said. "I don't know how long this ride's going to be, but let's get at least some of this repaired."

He wished there was time to properly do triage, but packed like this, he'd have to start by the door and work backwards.

It was good work. It made him feel like he was doing something, and he felt his mind relaxing as it hadn't for the last two years. He murmured reassurance and comfort. He let them hold onto him, hands almost crushing his shoulder, when the pain chips weren't quite enough. And all the while, broken plating became whole under his hands.

He thought about Megatron as he worked, and a memory rose in the back of his mind, so incongruous that it made him smile. The patient he was working on, a mech with a rusting wound up his side, his internals quite visible, saw his smile and smiled back at him. "I'm going to be okay?"

Barring a miracle, not really. "Of course," Ratchet said, patting his shoulder. "It's going to be a long haul, and no fragging fun, but you'll make it. Here, have a pain chip. It's not much, but it'll help."

"Thanks, doc."

Ratchet gave him another smile, this one far more forced, patted his shoulder and went to work. The memory reasserted itself. Helping Megatron with his graduation paperwork and evidence of progress. Poor kid was totally bewildered. That paperwork was bad enough. Add a processor skip to it, and it was a form of hell.

"Give me that," Ratchet said, plopping himself down next to Megatron. "This slag is designed to drive mecha mad. Stylus?"

Megatron had already assisted him on a few surgeries, handed the stylus over exactly the same way he would have a scalpel. It made Ratchet smile, looking at him. Megatron seemed unaware of what he'd done.

It was bad. Annoying. Vague questions. Only, Ratchet had helped hundreds of students. There was little the academy paperwork contained that could still scare him. So he worked on it, asking Megatron questions, at one point handing Megatron a puzzle to keep his hands busy while they worked.

And then they hit it.

"What. The. Frag. Is this," said Ratchet, holding the datapad up. "I've taught here for easily three centuries, and what. The. Frag. Is a 'study plan number'. I have never seen this before."

Megatron looked at him helplessly.

"Frag it. I am calling them." He activated the comm frequency, raising an optic ridge at Megatron's horrified expression. "Yes. You. What the frag is a 'study plan number'. Oh, I should know, should I? I'm only senior faculty, my mech, but I have never heard of such an absurd thing—Megatron. Megatron of Tarn. Oh no, you didn't lose it. I know you didn't lose it. You have five seconds to find it, or I'm coming down to help you. One. Two. Three— I don't care if it's not fair that I speed up counting. Oh look at that, five seconds are up. On my way."

He started to rise, gave Megatron a grin. Kid's expression was comical, optics completely round. On the other end of the line, the hapless staffer ordered to make their lives difficult sputtered urgently that he'd found it. Ratchet sat again. "Oh? Oh good. I knew you'd find it. Good job. All right, read that number off to me."

Pause, as he wrote it down, then read it back incorrectly. The mech corrected him. Probably meant it was the real one, but just in case... "And what's your name? Oh good. If this goes through, I'll put in a call so you get a commendation. Well done."

He looked at Megatron. "Well, all right. It's a little mean. But otherwise, the people tugging on their strings will make life a real hell for you. Bribery's better but I don't trust it in this case. Now, let's write down that number and get this submitted."

It was a shame they'd never really see what Megatron was capable of. He'd been a very competent surgeon and doctor, and his bedside manner, though dreadful to the higher castes, was excellent in the Dead End. Frag, it'd showed Ratchet the depths of his own incompetence.

Grief wrapped Ratchet's spark. He kept working. A pity there were not more mecha like Megatron...

He almost stopped working as he realized that there might well be.

That the best thing he could do, now he was away from the Functionists, was to recruit new medics. Other people whose dreams had been destroyed by the Functionists.

He'd trained Megatron, whose brain had been turned into a mess by shadowplay, aided only by Megatron's incredible determination.

He could do the same for someone else.

Chapter 42

Starscream walked out of the Vosian Academy of Sciences for the last time with his head held high, and a mass of stolen datapads in his subspace. A quick visit to the slums—less than two blocks from the Academy and several thousand feet down—and certain illegal operations had the papers his advisors had created on new weapons systems several months before they were due to be published.

Even criminal scum were smart. They'd figure out how to make that profitable.

He kept the best—and he knew it was the best, he'd worked on it—for himself.

That first night was the hardest. He'd already packed all his things, and he lay awake on the recharge slab, a true powerdown eluding him, staring at the ceiling of his far-too familiar little apartment, bare of everything that had made it his. Some smug little fragger with a microscope or centrifuge alt-mode would move in soon enough, he was sure, and he resisted the urge to sabotage the slab. Too much of a chance someone would notice before hand, and he'd be dealing with a fine.

Thundercracker and Skywarp, in a rare display of consideration, had given Starscream permission to call them whenever he'd like. Starscream had seriously considered it. Seriously considered it all night, and decided not to, because it would mean admitting how seriously this had gotten under his plating. As it was, he had about six hours before the military transport arrived to pull himself back together.

By the time the transport did arrive, he was more than ready to be out of the apartment. He stalked onto the transport, glared at the driver, and sat in the most inconvenient place he could manage, spreading himself and his belongings out so he took up the most space possible. Then he glared at the back of the driver's head. "Get on with it."

He refused to look at the receding towers of the university. They weren't worth his regret.

"Optimus: has fueled?"

"Yes, thank you Soundwave." Optimus glanced up at him with a smile. "I appreciate it."

"No appreciation necessary," said Soundwave. "Soundwave... is happy to help."

"Still." Optimus looked up at him, smiling—though Soundwave certainly couldn't see that through the mask.

"Here are the reports," said Soundwave, placing them on Optimus' desk. "Jazz has made his check-in. They are on a transport from Rodion. Expected arrival: ten hours."

"A transport?"

"Political refugees," said Soundwave. "Ratchet is tending to them."

"Good. Any news from Prowl?"

"Arrivals this morning: small combiner team, another cassette host and cassettes, a former

bodyguard, and several laborers. All in good condition. Combiner team has indicated interest in joining military operations.”

“Good. We can always use more people.” Optimus sighed heavily and leaned back in his seat. After a while he said, “It’s hard not to compare myself to him, you know.”

Soundwave cocked his head, clearly puzzled. “Who?”

“Megatron.” Optimus was looking at the ceiling. “Would he have ended this war by now? Reading his works, he was a smart mech. Far more so than I. And with the Primacy backing his efforts...” He sighed. “I’m worried I’m not the right mech for the job.”

“Optimus’s efforts: perfectly competent.”

“He advised me against taking over from Overlord, you know,” said Optimus, still staring at the ceiling. “I still worry about it; I wasn’t the one to kill him, but the alternative of a power vacuum seemed so much worse...” He sighed again. “I’m worried we built on a corrupt foundation.”

“A corrupt foundation can be strengthened.” Soundwave put a hand on Optimus’s shoulder. “New supports may be planted, the weight slowly shifted from the rotten to the sound.”

Optimus looked up at him, grateful. “Thank you, Soundwave,” he said.

“The future of Cybertron is most important,” said Soundwave. He tapped Optimus’s shoulder. “Do not let your uncertainties undermine it.”

“You’re not the only one,” said Skywarp.

Starscream glared at him. “Because comparing my misery to that of others makes me feel so much better.”

Skywarp waved his hands in denial. “That’s not what I meant!”

“What the twit here means,” said Thundercracker, peering up over the edge of his datapad at Starscream, “is that the number of people housed in this barracks alone has doubled in the last month. And a lot of them are intellectuals like you.”

Starscream frowned at his trinemates. Originally, they’d all attended the same institution. Skywarp had left voluntarily, because of bad scores and a general disinterest. Thundercracker had made it through the unspecialized portion of the coursework, then decided to focus on his writing. He’d made it all of a year into that before being disenrolled and conscripted.

Starscream had held on the longest, missing his trinemates except for their brief flying sessions on days off, but utterly determined to make his career as a scientist, no matter the odds against him.

The odds had become too high.

“Flightframes should be military,” said Thundercracker softly. “Most of them—no one told them that explicitly, but it was implicit in what happened. But with some of them, the ejection from the institution wasn’t nicely cloaked in a thin veneer of justice, like yours, Starscream, but they just were...disenrolled. Registrations failed. And the recruiters were waiting for them outside the door.”

“What I want to know is why now?” said Skywarp. “Like, seriously. We’re not at war with anyone, except maybe the Decepticons and they’re very noisy troublemakers at best.”

They both turned to look at Skywarp, who gave them a worried stare in response. “Right? I didn’t just say something stupid, did I?”

“They raid for energon,” said Thundercracker thoughtfully. “They’re running refugee camps down there in Kaon, and nothing the Council’s done has gotten rid of them yet. I don’t know if that’s luck or skill. They’ve not tried to turn the whole army against them, but maybe someone’s worried.”

“Decepticons?” said Starscream, blankly.

“Have you been under a rock?” said Skywarp. “It’s all anyone talks about. The Decepticon rebellion. They’ve not gotten too far out of Kaon but they’re there... and a lot of the political dissidents keep escaping down there. WHO knows what they’re planning.”

“Which is probably why they’re conscripting so many people. Especially flyers,” said Thundercracker. “Optimus—that’s their leader—Optimus hasn’t got any flyers at all behind him. An air offensive might do the trick. Starscream, you liked politics, how did you miss this?”

Starscream folded his arms and looked away. “I was doing research.” *Desperately trying to fill every gap I could so they wouldn’t decide I was faking my research and throw me out. Lots of good that did me!*

But he was turning the situation over in his mind. New conscripts, many like him, torn out of their chosen careers with a thin approximation of justice—which in reality amounted to unjust accusations. Humiliated and expelled and dumped here to fight the Decepticons, whoever they were.

“Who in their right mind calls themselves *Decepticons*?” he sneered. “It makes them sound like the villains.”

“Optimus says it’s to honor Megatron Prime,” said Skywarp, and even Starscream knew that name, remembered the mech’s defiant speech and terrible fall. He hesitated.

But...

“Look,” said Skywarp. “These are technically banned, of course, but... here.”

He handed Starscream a datapad. Starscream lifted it.

Stared at the heading burning there on the screen.

FORM DOES NOT DICTATE FUNCTION.

Lowered it.

And smiled.

“Oh no,” said Skywarp, very quietly.

Starscream kept smiling. An army filled with malcontents. People like him. Except not really. No one else was going to have the bearings to do what he was going to do.

He didn’t know what the Decepticons really were. But what mattered, the only thing that mattered,

was that the Functionists be punished for what they'd done to him. For what they'd taken from him.

Turning their own army against them would be the perfect revenge, and what better work to build off of than that of the Decepticons? What name better to invoke than that of the fallen Prime, that poor, foolish, brave mech who'd overtly defied the council and died for his pains?

Starscream would have his revenge.

And then, unless this Optimus was very, very clever, cleverer than someone who named his movement the Decepticons was likely to be, Starscream might see about sweeping that movement out from under him. Power. Real power, to change things as they ought to be changed.

Yes.

That might be just enough to assuage the pain of losing his research career.

Chapter 43

The transport rumbled to a stop. After a moment, the back door opened.

Ratchet knew he stank. He knew he was covered in energon and all the other fluids a truck full of tired, sick mecha could produce. Nevertheless, he glared at the people who'd opened the door. "Do you mind? I'm calibrating his fragging eyes."

"Ratchet," said Orion's voice, relieved. "We're so glad to see you."

"Yeah, he's going to be so glad to see me, too," snapped Ratchet, going back to work. "Everyone's stable, close the door for five more minutes and then I'll be properly happy to see you."

They did. Ratchet went back to work, finished the calibrations, and instructed someone to knock on the back of the transport. It opened again, to show a welcoming party somewhat deflated by the delay. "Now you can thank me," said Ratchet, and as soon as they'd unloaded enough of the van to unload him as well, found himself dragged into an immense hug by Orion—no, Optimus—himself.

"I am so glad you're all right."

"You're going to be covered in energon," said Ratchet, glumly.

"Some things are more important," said Optimus, sounding very happy, and hugged harder. "Jazz said it went off without a hitch."

"If that was going off without a hitch, I'm terrified to see what Jazz defines as a hitch," said Ratchet. "Primus." Jazz had done a good job, but he wasn't deep enough into this rebel general thing to define being shot at as smooth sailing. "But he did well, all things considered. Where's your infirmary? Jazz tells me you have refugees."

"And only a recently-graduated medical student to tend to them. You might know him—First Aid?"

Ratchet tried not to freeze up. "Pharma's student."

"He defected as soon as he got his degree."

"I recall." There had been a lot of yelling that night. Ratchet rubbed his wrist, reflexively. At least Pharma had stopped short of breaking it, though it wasn't as if Ratchet could have given himself much credit for that. Pharma hadn't been listening to his denials. Shouted or sobbed.

He still felt guilty for leaving him there. He'd forgotten it while treating patients, but the guilt came back now.

Optimus saw his expression close down. "Ratchet? Are you all right?"

"Fine," said Ratchet. "Where are the patients?"

"You should rest..."

"No," snapped Ratchet. He looked away, and then decided to take the risk, the hope that Optimus might listen to him. "We left Pharma. And..."

"Oh no," said Optimus, horrified. "I'm sorry. If Jazz didn't manage it, it was impossible. Don't

torment yourself over it, Ratchet. We'll make sure he's safe."

Ratchet almost set him right. Almost said, *he was my jailer, not my lover*, almost waved his wrist under Optimus's oblivious nasal ridge.

But he didn't.

The next question might be why he'd stayed. Or when it'd gone wrong. Optimus beating himself up over having overlooked it. And nothing Optimus could say after that revelation would make Ratchet feel better. There would be condemnation and outrage on his behalf, shock, anger that Pharma had "fooled them", and Optimus wouldn't understand why Ratchet felt guilty. Pharma would be left to the Functionists and after everything, Ratchet couldn't do that. It was one thing to not take him in the moment, but to destroy all chances of escape?

He couldn't.

He couldn't.

So he said nothing.

"Well?" said Prowl softly, watching Ratchet leave with Optimus.

"Delicate," said Jazz. "He's burying himself in work. He did that the whole way here. I asked if he wanted me to extract Pharma with him. He hesitated. I made the call to just take him."

"He hesitated," said Prowl, and his optics narrowed. "That's telling."

"Yup. If you look at the politics, Pharma's in good with the Council. Despite Ratchet's activities. That makes sense to me. Not sure Optimus has a nasty enough processor for it to make sense to him."

"Still," said Prowl. "I worry. I don't want him unsupervised. We haven't seen him in two years, we haven't had word from him in two years, and Functionist mnemosurgeons could have done anything in that time."

"Don't I know it," said Jazz, rocking forward and back on his stabilizers. "Don't I know it... Well, we know Aid's clean, we'll have him take a look. Then..."

"I want to watch him for a few months," said Prowl. "Before we let him know."

"Understood." Jazz sighed. "It can wait a few months, right?"

"Everything's stable. The risk of the wait is less than not waiting."

"I'll go with you on this one, but can't say I like it."

"I know."

Sedition was so much *fun*.

He should have dabbled *long ago*.

The thing was, Starscream found himself sympathizing altogether too much with the cause he was espousing. Far from being a means to an end, he was beginning to actually believe in what the Decepticons were working toward... and he didn't like that at all. That was embarrassing.

But... Megatron had had some excellent points.

Optimus was more stodgy but he had some good points, too. Starscream found himself reading and rereading that borrowed datapad from Thundercracker more often than he wanted to admit. Worse still, he found himself responding to it on a spark-deep level. Most often, it made him angry. Everything that had happened to hi, all the unfairnesses, the destruction of his career, all of this fit in with a larger pattern. Worst still? Everything pointed to it getting worse. And worse. Who knew if it would be violent revolution or a Functionist dystopia that won, but sooner or later they were going to have to deal with one or the other.

Violent revolution sounded pretty good to Starscream.

And the more he read, the more he *thought*, the more the current system—and anyone who'd benefitted from it—seemed totally irredeemable.

What to replace it?

Megatron had died before he could posit a replacement system.

Optimus was being cagey.

Megatron had briefly touched on the idea of empathy overcoming all els, which had made Starscream laugh derisively and uproariously. Fortunately, the writings close to his disappearance had begun to come around to something else, something both more practical and authoritarian. There'd been hope for him yet, Starscream thought.

Starscream had no idea how the Decepticons were organizing themselves. Probably as a militia. Which meant that either Optimus was in favor of a military-style chain of command, or he'd soon come around to it.

And that was exactly the sort of system conducive to a coup.

Primus. Look at the way Optimus wrote. One foot in front of the other, full of foolish idealism that would get people killed. The Decepticons, if they were to succeed, needed a new leader.

And given how quickly Starscream had moved up the chain of command these last few months, there was no reason to be modest. He himself would be well suited for it.

To his shock, he found himself enjoying command. Sure, it'd been unpleasant, before command realized the advantages to an educated officer, and started promoting him. The promotions made him think that maybe this wasn't all pointless after all. He'd begun to put actual *effort* in, and that had even better effects.

He was beginning to consider taking a firmer hand in his own fate. He had compromising material on several of his immediate superiors. Some compromising material on people who were considerably further up the chain of command as well.

Disseminating it, of course, would do the trick.

His equals and his inferiors would be happy to see him rise. He was the one who bought everyone drinks, that first promotion. He was the attentive audial. He was stern but fair—and a little more than fair to those who lent a servo at the right time, those who listened carefully and were... helpful. He'd been careful to make no firm statements of political beliefs, but some careful copying and judicious placement of 'lost' unlocked datapads meant most of his mecha were reading Decepticon philosophy. With no clue, of course, who'd left them there...

He still had much to learn. But that wouldn't be the case for long...

Chapter 44

“Look on the bright side,” said Starscream, swirling the energon in his cube, grinning. “Your death will serve a purpose.”

The mech he was talking to didn’t respond. Starscream rose, sauntered over to him. “By now, I’m sure, the toxin’s frozen your neurotransmitters. So you can’t really do anything about this.” He tilted the mech’s head back, pressing at the hinge of the jaws. The mech’s mouth opened. “Your model has the advantage of having no vents in the intake. Makes it difficult not to overheat, but at least it means this will be a little more comfortable.” He tipped the contents of the cube down the mech’s throat, smiling as he explained. “They won’t find anything out of the ordinary in your tank, you see. There’s a compound in that which breaks down the toxin. Of course, that’s not going to help you. It’s already disrupted your neural net beyond repair.” He wiped the mech’s face off, but didn’t dissolve the forcefield covering his hand. Not yet.

“You may wonder why I’m doing this,” he said. “It’s simple. Remember Flashbang?”

It was a pity the mech couldn’t acknowledge him. He was still alive, but the paralysis made a particularly unappealing conversational partner.

“Well,” Starscream went on, “I’m not sure Flashbang remembers Flashbang anymore. Oh yes, I know about the Institute, which is probably where they took him. After you reported him. So that purpose your death is going to serve? Is showing exactly what happens to informants in this army.”

The monitor in his hand beeped. Time to go. The virus he’d planted once the paralysis set in would start erasing itself in a few seconds, which would mean he couldn’t put the final touch on this. He sauntered to the door, cube still in hand.

He looked over his shoulder. “You may think you’re keeping the unruly flightframes in order,” he said. “Your delusion. We’re the ones in charge here.”

He left, let the doors close behind him. Then used the virus to make the dying mech’s transmitters send the code to lock the door behind him.

He sauntered away, unconcerned about security cameras. He knew all their blind spots, and the ones in the office and the corridor hadn’t worked in weeks. A subsystem outage. What a pity the repair requests kept going astray.

The cube was disposed of later that day in pieces. Fell out of some idiot’s subspace during maneuvers, how clumsy...

One of Starscream’s people ended up in the place of the unfortunate informer. The enforcers ruled it a suicide. The mech had locked the room himself, after all, and no murder weapon was ever found. The enforcers on the military base weren’t highly paid enough to pursue what looked like a long, drawn-out murder investigation—even if it was an actual murder. The mech hadn’t had many friends, after all. There were regrets, recriminations, lectures on warning signs.

Starscream found that assassination suited him well indeed.

The only problem was not boasting about his own cleverness. But sacrifices had to be made for the cause.

“Ratchet?”

Ratchet looked up and found himself grinning. “Drift!”

Drift’s smile faltered. He looked away. “It’s Deadlock now.”

“Deadlock. My apologies. Optimus said you were away—I wasn’t expecting it to be so long.”

Deadlock walked in. Ratchet watched him, increasingly unsettled. He didn’t move like Drift, but something predatory, and the flash of fang in his mouth was deeply unsettling. Too much smirk, too much swagger. Deadlock seemed more like one of the mecha who’d roughed him up than the bot Megatron had rescued.

“Optimus says I need a checkup,” said Deadlock, sneering at the equipment. He vaulted up onto the medical berth, an unnecessarily showy movement, but beautiful. He held out an arm and popped a diagnostic port. “All my patches are holding up, just check the coding.”

“Don’t think you’re getting out of it that easy,” snapped Ratchet. “I’ll take a look at them myself, and don’t think you’re getting out of welds if you need them.”

Deadlock got right up in his faceplate, fangs fully bared and red optics—when had he changed them out?—blazing. “You don’t get to give me orders.”

Ratchet’s other hand, the one holding the wrench, whacked Drift upside the helm with it. Lightly. Just enough to make a clang, and his point. “Fraggin’ watch me kid.”

Deadlock *snarled* at him, and Ratchet felt sharp claws in the sensitive energon lines around his throat. “I said—”

“Look,” said Ratchet, realizing he’d escalated the situation past what he could handle, “you’ll fraggin’ rust if you did any of those wrong, and it’s my job—not only as CMO, but as a half-decent medic—to *check*, damn you. I get that you want to act big and tough in front of the staff, but it’s a stupid idea. Let me do my job.” And then, because he was a complete fool, he added, “Idiot.”

Deadlock stared at him, sullenly. The claws slowly withdrew from his throat. “Would have thought you’d get less bossy with treating Decepticons for a few weeks.”

“Yeah, well, none of you ever accused me of being smart,” said Ratchet.

“Yeah, well, don’t try it again,” said Deadlock, and thankfully, submitted to the rest of the examination.

After Deadlock left, Ratchet sat down heavily and ran a hand over his face. He had a lot to learn about Decepticons, apparently.

“Well,” said a voice above him, “I’m real glad I didn’t have to interfere in that fight. Deadlock’s got me entirely too figured out for my comfort.”

Ratchet looked up, and found Jazz hanging upside-down from one of the industrial pipes on the ceiling. “Do you mind?”

“Nah. You can be just as much of a dumbaft as you’d like.” Jazz swung down. “But it’s not the Dead End here anymore. Mecha there were willing to put up with a lot from you, because they

needed your help. Now, they feel like they've got choices, and they can demonstrate that by, well, not putting up with anything from you, even when it's in their best interests." Jazz thumped him on the shoulder. "So be careful."

Chapter 45

“I’d like to know what’s going on with the Vosians,” said Ironhide, leaning across the holotable and tapping a finger over the display for the Vosian military academy. “Informants there have told us they’ve got both a large number of flyers, and that there’ve been some orders to get them moving our direction, but none of them have actually moved. So the frag’s the hold-up?”

“Your average flyer doesn’t follow orders?” said Hot Rod, and winced and shut up as someone kicked him in the ankle.

“Hm.” Optimus ignored Hot Rod and stared down at the table. “You’re right. I don’t like that. They’ve got every reason to move on us, and it’s not as if our air defense is good. They haven’t yet. And I think that means they’ve got something nasty in store for us.”

“My thoughts exactly. With Soundwave’s permission—,” Soundwave nodded, “I’d like to invest a little more of our resources into figuring out what, exactly, they’re up to.”

“Soundwave: will go in person,” said Soundwave.

Optimus looked at him with concern, not bothering to hide it. He really didn’t like the idea of Soundwave in Functionist hands. “Soundwave, you’re wanted as badly as I am. I do not want you putting yourself in unnecessary danger.”

“Soundwave: has suspicions that all is not as it seems in Vos. Soundwave: would like to verify situation for himself.”

“It’s your decision, my friend,” said Optimus. He didn’t like saying it. Soundwave looked up at him, visor flickering in surprise—at his tone or at the permission, Optimus wasn’t sure.

The rest of the meeting passed quickly. There were updates to the evacuation of civilians from their newest territories, troop movements, casualty reports. Optimus firmly forced his mind back to business, and not how worried he was going to be about Soundwave when he left.

Ratchet did take Jazz’s advice to spark. He was a lot more careful about how he handled the patients, which was distressing, irritating, but mostly kept him from being slagged. The political dissidents were very much like his old patients at the medical academy, but the techniques he’d learned in the Dead End—often of being firm, authoritative, and totally unwilling to take any slag—were just as likely to blow up in his face as work. First Aid seemed to have sorted something out, but Ratchet suspected a great deal of it was shameless bribery. He tried the thing with the rust sticks, but from him it was grumbling and condescending.

Ratchet’s primary weapon was intimidation. First Aid’s seemed to be guilt.

He and First Aid discussed who to bring in as trainees—they eventually settled on Hook and Ambulon. Ratchet got along a lot better with Ambulon than Hook. The other mech’s ego was difficult to manage, and he seemed to be trying to compete with Ratchet at every turn, something Ratchet had no intention of putting up with. First Aid, probably because of his experience with Pharma, was a great deal better at dealing with Hook’s behavior, and so after a while, Ratchet largely left his instruction in First Aid’s hands.

Ratchet found himself unreasonably exhausted most of the time, consuming vast quantities of midgrade to keep himself awake. It was quite possibly the best he'd slept in his life—even surrounded by criminals, violent, desperate, political dissidents, and in a small enclave squarely in the crosshairs of the Functionist Council's rage. After two years at the mercy of Pharma's bad temper, it seemed like a refuge.

Well, mostly a refuge.

He really had to stop running his mouth off at everyone.

Turmoil was *a lot* bigger than he was, and Ratchet probably should have stayed quiet when the mech elbowed him out of the way in the hallway, but instead he'd made an acidic comment. He blamed the exhaustion.

Now Turmoil was looming over him. He hadn't done anything *but* loom, yet.

Ratchet didn't have a lot of faith it'd stay that way.

So, like the idiot he was, he said, "You're also late for your standard physical." After all, if he was going to get slagged, he'd like to get it over with fairly quickly. He was also angry. Angry he'd been bumped into to start with, angry he was now in this position again, and if he intentionally torqued Turmoil off, it'd mean he'd had some sort of hand in it as well, and wasn't just the sort of mech who got bullied in the corridors.

It was amazing how expressive Turmoil could be without a mouth. Ratchet raised his hands, hoping he could at least get one of Turmoil's neural clusters before he got slagged.

And someone hit Turmoil in the waist at full speed and knocked him over. There was a clang as a fist made contact with abdominal plating, and it took Ratchet several blinks to identify his rescuer as Deadlock.

Deadlock got in a few more punches, then leaned forward to snarl something into Turmoil's audial, before pushing himself upright again with a knee in Turmoil's interface paneling. He looked at Ratchet.

"Thanks, kid," Ratchet managed after a moment.

"Jazz wanted an eye kept on you," said Deadlock, almost accusing, and left. Turmoil slowly got to his feet as well, and, *pointedly* not looking at Ratchet, limped in the direction of the barracks, leaving Ratchet standing in the corridor, wondering what the frag had just happened.

Soundwave thought he'd done well disguising himself. He'd changed his paintjob, the color of his visor, and removed his faceplate entirely. He'd only taken Laserbeak and Ravage along with him, and even then he hadn't carried them docked. His experiences at checkpoints carried out his evaluation of his disguise; he walked directly under several posters of himself without anyone noticing.

There were enough outside military experts advising Vos, so it was easy enough to slip into the administrative buildings on a stolen badge hastily reconfigured to reflect his vital signs, rather than the unfortunate mech he replaced. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. He spent a busy day

running errands, being generally helpful, and making copies of everything people put into his hands.

He thought he'd gone unnoticed, but as he was preparing to leave, someone grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him in tight. "Gotcha," a voice whispered in his audial, and Soundwave's tanks lurched.

They lurched again as his captor teleported.

Chapter 46

The operation was a simple one, repairing and replacing a fuel tank that had gotten a bad rust infection. He'd done similar with Megatron many times in the Dead End, in far worse conditions.

Now, the conditions in the Decepticon medical ward weren't great—but they were better than those had been by far. After all, Optimus was highly invested in making sure everyone got proper care. So Ratchet was as relaxed as he ever got during surgery, filled with the satisfaction of an important task well done.

"All right," he said at last. "It's time to close up. Megatron, the welder?"

It was a good thing he didn't realize what he'd said until he was mostly done with closing up the wound. He turned off the welder as his hands began shaking; First Aid took it gently from him and finished the job before Ratchet realized that he'd frozen.

"Ambulon," First Aid said, gentle but confident, "I'm leaving you in charge of post-op care. Give me a comm if you notice anything—anything at all—out of the ordinary, all right? I'm pretty sure you can handle it, but I want to be there for you if you need any help. Ratchet and I will be in the break room."

Ratchet should have been angry, he realized, but he couldn't feel it. He allowed himself to be led to scrub out, letting force of habit guide his motions. He followed First Aid's gentle guidance to the staff room, and sat as directed as First Aid closed the door and soundproofed the room and then...

...Then the self-loathing crested, and the horror, and the rage that he'd allowed himself to go into such a funk over saying the wrong name, Megatron was *dead, dead, dead*, had been dead for years, why did it destroy him like this? He was selfish for it, incompetent, how dare he allow those feelings to so paralyze him when there was a *patient on his fragging table*?

Pharma was fragging right.

He wasn't supposed to be here. He was not a good enough doctor to care for all these people, not if he was doing fragging stupid things like this.

"Hey. Hey. Ratchet? Ratchet. It's all right. Everything's fine."

Had he offlined his optics? He hadn't realized it. He forced them back online to see First Aid's worried expression.

"Everything is *not* fine," he spat. "I just fragged up *big time*, so don't you dare tell me everything's all right."

"Except that it is," said First Aid, firmly. "The patient didn't suffer for it. You turned off the welder just before your hands started to shake, and you had me to assist. You drilled it into all of our processors in class, that's what assistants are for. Nothing bad happened, Ratchet."

"But I—,"

"You're not infallible. No one is," said First Aid. He looked around, as if he expected to see someone lurking over his shoulder, then knelt in front of Ratchet, putting his hands over Ratchet's right hand—his scalpel hand. "I know no one's saying this out loud but look—you've been through Pit. Don't tell me otherwise. I *was* Pharma's student."

Ratchet glared at him. First Aid just looked back at him, level, totally unimpressed.

“Megatron meant a lot to you, didn’t he,” said First Aid. “You outraged Pharma by taking him on. Pharma thought you were staking your career on him, but Pharma’s always overdramatic, so I can’t say I believed him. But he mattered a lot.”

Ratchet closed his eyes.

“Yes,” he said. “He did.”

“It’s all right to grieve,” said First Aid. “And it’s all right to care so much about him. He needed someone to care about him. He needs it, even now. Even if he’s dead.”

Ratchet wanted to snap at him, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead he stared over First Aid’s right shoulder.

Then he said it. What had kept him awake, spark twisting with guilt, since that day.

“I don’t think that bullet ever touched his sparkchamber.”

First Aid said nothing.

“The angle wasn’t right. If you watch carefully, you can see the exit wound. There’s a lot of other vital stuff in there—fuel tank, t-cog—but it didn’t hit his spark. He didn’t die instantly.” Ratchet sank his head into his hands. “I doubt he would have survived. Not without immediate care. No one got into that area for hours, and then it was the Functionists, and they would have wanted to make sure he was actually dead.”

“Or they would have shadowplayed him,” said First Aid softly.

Ratchet shook his head. “Shadowplay doesn’t work on matrix bearers. They got an impressive demonstration of that. And if they’d found a way to manipulate him, we’d have seen him again. And if he’d escaped...”

He would have gone looking for Terminus. And even unwounded, he probably wouldn’t have survived that. Not with the rioting. Not with the enforcers. Not with how distinctive he was.

“If he’d escaped, we’d have seen him by now,” he said. “He would have found a way to come back, to see the movement he started realized. He wasn’t the sort to run away.”

He drew a shaking breath. “No. Megatron died there, alone. And it was horrible, and painful, and slow, and if I’d been there I could have saved him. But I wasn’t.”

Primus, it hurt worse than realizing he’d lost Pharma. But maybe those memories of Pharma were so worn with the daily misery of the last two years that they couldn’t hurt anymore. He’d accepted the new Pharma. That his mate had changed, and this was his reality, and he’d hung on and survived, because it was the only way *to* survive at all.

But knowing how Megatron had died—that was a wound that hadn’t healed.

It felt so—so pointless. Both of them had fought with all their sparks to keep him alive, to help him against all odds achieve his dream. And with that dream, open the gates to hundreds, no, thousands, of other mecha who’d lived all their functions believing that they couldn’t do what they loved because of what shape they’d been forged as.

And it ended with a sniper's shot through the chest.

When they thought they were going to finally, finally get justice, when there was a flicker of belief in a just world, it had been torn away.

And Megatron was dead.

It was hard living with this new world, but at least there was a way to keep fighting. But for Megatron, there would be no more fighting. He didn't have an opportunity to fail and try again because *he was fragging dead*.

And not even a fast death.

He'd probably lain there for hours, feeling his life trickle out of him, hot and cold as systems worked themselves to the brink of burnout to try to preserve him, to compensate for the damage. Primus, Ratchet had seen mecha's energon burst into flames from the heat of their own systems. No one would have noticed or tried to help him. There'd been too many fires, and he'd been too far out of reach for the crowds. If he hadn't been, they would at least have had a corpse.

Cybertronian bodies were tough. Cybertronians could live through a lot. Didn't mean they wouldn't be in agony the whole time.

At this point, Ratchet believed it more of a curse than a blessing. Energon combustion could still take hours to kill you.

Or he would have just leaked out. Maybe shock would have spared him the worst of the pain. Maybe. Sometimes, broken t-cogs would try to engage, their coding and function corrupted by damage, and the resulting forces could literally turn a mech inside out. That would certainly explain never finding a body. Most people wouldn't even see it as a body. Horrible pain. Not immediately fatal. System stress and leaking out—that might eventually kill you.

Maybe he'd been crushed in the resulting collapse. That was the most merciful death Ratchet could imagine.

And Ratchet had done nothing. Could do nothing. A literal, total inability. You'd think that would alleviate the guilt but it didn't. He kept those memories of Megatron close, of his cheerfulness, his determination. Of long surgeries. Of his gradual, struggling improvement.

He had died horribly, alone, and *he hadn't fragging deserved it*.

Maybe it would have been better if he'd been shot in the clinic.

Ratchet heard himself sob. First Aid put a comforting servo on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Ratchet," he said, and Ratchet knew he should respond, but the words wouldn't come. He was too tired.

"I'm so sorry," said First Aid again. "You cared about him very much, I can tell, and he was lucky to have you as a mentor. He wouldn't have gotten as far as he did if he wasn't good—but you made sure he *could* do it when everyone else tried to stop him. Including me."

There was guilt in those last two words, and that made Ratchet look up. First Aid looked down at him, visor dim.

"I remember something about you two being friends," said Ratchet slowly.

“Yes,” said First Aid. “And I honestly, honestly, don’t know what happened. I think I heard something—something really bad about him, but now I can’t remember it, or who told me, or why I believed it so strongly. Just, at the time, I panicked. I couldn’t be around him. And I think it hurt him a very great deal. I’m so glad he recovered, but by the time I started questioning what I’d done, he was with you in the Dead End, and Pharma was, well...”

“I know,” said Ratchet.

“I still don’t remember why,” First Aid said and his hands knotted in front of him.

“I think you were shadowplayed,” said Ratchet. “I think they would have gone after me, if they’d thought they could get away with it.”

“I looked it up. My symptoms did fit with that.”

“Then it wasn’t your fault.” Ratchet gave First Aid a forced smile. “And when he mentioned it... I did tell him it was a possibility. I don’t think he ever blamed you.”

The flicker of First Aid’s visor was as close as he got to a smile. “That matters a lot to me.”

He sat down next to Ratchet, looking earnestly up at him. “And Ratchet? Take it easier on yourself, all right? You’re recovering from a lot. Don’t hurt yourself worse by blaming yourself for it. You have every reason to grieve, and I bet Pharma didn’t give you time to do that.”

“Don’t tell me my job, kid,” said Ratchet, but it did make him feel a little better. Enough to sit up. And maybe, in a few minutes, keep going.

Chapter 47

“Well, well, well,” said Starscream, putting his thrusters up in on the desk in front of him, “what have we here?”

The mech on the other side of the table glared at him.

“I’m guessing that you were either sent by Optimus and the Decepticons, or by the Functionists,” said Starscream. “The Functionists think they own the base, so I sincerely doubt you’re working for them. Besides, you’re too competent.”

The mech inclined his helm a little in acknowledgement.

“If you were a Functionist, you wouldn’t leave this room online,” said Starscream. “I’m sure you understand. We have too much at stake.”

The mech was silent.

“But if you’re really one of Optimus’ people, you’d be very valuable to the Functionists. I could hand you over and buy us more time. Perhaps more allies. What do you think?”

The look he was given was noncommittal.

Starscream felt the prickle of bad temper and fanned his wings in a threat display. He leaned across the desk, teeth bared. “Let me rephrase this. Who are you, why are you here, and I just might be persuaded not to hand you over?”

The mech looked away, obviously considering.

“I’m not known for my patience,” Starscream warned.

“Would Starscream have interest in aiding the Decepticons?” said the mech.

Starscream leaned back, wings settling as he smirked. “What can you offer me?”

“Terms: would have to be negotiated with Optimus in person.”

Starscream snorted.

“Decepticons: have no air support. Starscream: may be able to negotiate a title such as Air Commander. No certainty until negotiations begin.”

Starscream liked that idea, but didn’t let it show. “You still haven’t told me your name.”

An evaluating look. “Designation: Soundwave.”

Starscream’s smirk grew. “Sounds like we’ve gotten some serious attention from the Decepticons. You’re his second in command, aren’t you?”

Soundwave inclined his head in a nod. “Make no mistake: Soundwave is disposable. Intelligence collected already in Decepticon hands.”

“Optimus’s writing makes him sound a bit of a bleeding spark,” said Starscream. “I bet you’re at least of sentimental value.”

Silence.

“We’ll consider it,” said Starscream. “Let’s make our guest comfortable in the meantime.”

Ratchet still wasn’t exactly doing well. Frag, talking to First Aid seemed to have made things harder, not easier. Now he was paying attention to them, his grief and anger ran much closer to the surface, and it was only a matter of time before he got himself in trouble again.

Unfortunately, the mech he lost his temper with wasn’t as nice as Deadlock.

It was Sunstreaker.

Ratchet had had very little to do with pit fighters. Overlord had had his own medics for that, and the few times Ratchet’s skills were required, the patients were in bad enough condition, they were desperate for assistance—and in no mood to give the medic trouble.

So Ratchet had significantly underestimated just how fragged crazy they could be.

Which was probably why he’d just found himself pinned to the wall by a very angry frontliner.

“I do not *have* a ‘facing disease,” snarled Sunstreaker, giving Ratchet a really good view of his sharpened dentae. “I do not *need* to be *tested*. What, you think us lower-caste mechs just frag all the time? Don’t take care of ourselves? Huh?”

Ratchet snarled right back. He knew he shouldn’t have, but he was seething with panic and not thinking straight. Later, he’d realize it was too reminiscent of a previous fight with Pharma, and it was little wonder logic and reason and conflict de-escalation had all gone right out the fragging viewport. “It’s part of the standard physical, you arrogant half-afted crankshaft!”

His vision whited as he was shaken.

“I had to do it too,” he added, tasting energon from where he’d bitten his glossa. “All the medical staff—everyone, even Optimus!”

“Well, I’m not,” Sunstreaker declared, and dropped him. Ratchet landed on his aft, knees folding up under him.

“It’s a requirement before you’re considered fit for duty,” Ratchet told him.

And found himself with a gun in his face.

He froze.

What really torqued him off about this is he hadn’t seen it coming. It’d been perfectly civil—even if Sunstreaker, like most frontliners, had been consistently sullen. Right up until Ratchet had requested the energon sample for the interface-transmitted diseases screening.

He’d carefully explained what it was for, as usual. And that had been what set Sunstreaker off.

He wasn’t sure whether or not Sunstreaker was going to shoot him. He was probably just trying to be scary to the poor stupid medic. But Ratchet had been wrong enough today that he didn’t dare trust his own common sense.

The door opened.

“Sunstreaker, get the frag off him,” said Ironhide. “You all right, doc? Sunstreaker, lower that gun or so help me Primus, I will kick your skidplate into next week and then tell Optimus exactly what you did.”

Sunstreaker actually wilted a little at that. He lowered the gun, sneered at Ratchet, and sulked his way out of the room.

“Primus, doc,” said Ironhide, ignoring Sunstreaker. “You have got to stop mouthing off to people who can kick your skidplate.”

“I didn’t mouth off to him,” growled Ratchet, shaking off Ironhide’s offered hand. “He took exception to the mandated tests.”

“Whatever you say,” said Ironhide, clearly not convinced. He frowned at Ratchet’s injuries. “Do you even know how to throw a punch? I mean, not that neural cluster thing you like to do, but actually fight?”

The look Ratchet gave him was perfectly blank.

“All right,” said Ironhide. “Guess the rest of your appointments this afternoon are canceled. Jazz told me he was sick of watching your aft get kicked and to do something about it. No, this isn’t optional. Come on.”

Ratchet cursed at him, but Ironhide stolidly ignored him and dragged him off to the training facilities. Secretly, Ratchet was glad he didn’t have time to mope, though that didn’t last long, with how achey he was afterward.

Escaping from the cell Starscream had thrown him in was simplicity itself. Soundwave made a face, remembered he didn’t have his faceplate to hide behind anymore, and felt annoyed at himself.

Getting into Starscream’s office was somewhat harder, but Soundwave took comfort in the fact their new ally was probably not a complete fool. But once he was in, and once Ravage joined him, it was simple again to transfer Starscream’s data and communications to an external drive—along with a few other things that Soundwave was sure Starscream didn’t want him to know about.

Ravage left, taking their findings to where they could be used. Soundwave lingered. He and Starscream still needed to talk.

At his request, Ravage tripped one of Starscream’s personal alarms on the way out. Soundwave sat there in Starscream’s chair, and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. An outraged Starscream and his trine barged into the room scant seconds later, quivering with outrage—and fear.

“Soundwave: has a very great deal of information on Starscream. Starscream: will either release Soundwave and guarantee safe passage back to Kaon, or enter negotiations to join the Decepticons. If Starscream attempts to turn on any Decepticon—including Soundwave—this information will be released to Starscream’s superiors.”

He watched the reaction.

As expected, screeching. Empty threats. Bristling.

But Starscream caved, all the same.

And in just the way Soundwave had expected.

The Decepticons now had air superiority.

Chapter 48

Ironhide was a good drinking buddy, but Ratchet had a whole new appreciation for why so many mecha cursed his name after one or two days of his training.

Promoting Ironhide to the rank of sergeant was a great idea, after all. He had a gift for teaching even the most incompetent civilian how to defend himself, and Ratchet deeply respected that. He just wished he weren't on the receiving end of it. Even if Ironhide was definitely being gentle. Even if Ironhide had taken to locking the training room, because one afternoon of being the base's entertainment had been more than enough for Ratchet. Some of the onlookers who'd showed up to his first lesson wanted to cheer him on; the vast majority, however, were military and labor frames who wanted to see a delicate intellectual get an idea of real life.

Jazz was right. When people had been hungry, aching from untreated wounds, they'd been happier to see assistance, even if it came from someone who benefitted from their oppression. Now? Ratchet was useful, but disdained, because disdain for people like him was suddenly something they could afford to show.

Most of his old patients recognized him and gave him the benefit of the doubt. But they were such a tiny drop in the bucket. If he needed reinforcement of how little what his clinic had done mattered? Here it was.

He couldn't really blame them.

He'd spent enough time angry at himself, but his own mental torment hadn't done fragall for them, and what direct action he'd taken hadn't been enough, hadn't been wide enough, even if it was deserved.

No wonder Prowl was taking care of so many refugees. Ratchet at least filled a useful role on the military base; for someone who'd been a scientist, or a courier, or, Primus forbid, an artist, and had decided not to take part in the fighting? That was a nightmare.

Because it did seem like the upper caste frametypes who did volunteer to fight were accepted fairly quickly. It was anyone who was upper caste with an 'easy' seeming job who had a bad time, and unfortunately, Ratchet fell into that category.

However, as soon as it became known that Ironhide was kicking his skidplate around, attitudes toward Ratchet seemed to change.

"It's not only you learning how to toss somemech across the room," said Ironhide. "It's them seeing that you're learning the same things they are. That you're not stalking around with you nose in the air, looking down on them. It's not fair, I know, but none of these mecha have ever had the slightest expectation of fairness, and neither should you."

Ratchet rubbed his back ruefully. "I'm too old for this slag."

"Aren't we all," said Ironhide cheerfully, just standing there. He beckoned Ratchet with one hand. "Come on, I'll throw you in slow motion this time so you see what I'm doing."

Megatron would have been good at this, Ratchet realized as he went flying, and said, "I wish you could have taught Megatron," aloud before he thought better of it.

Ironhide offered him a hand up. "You knew him?"

“He was my apprentice,” said Ratchet. “A damned good medic, before he got the Matrix.”

“For all the good that did him,” said Ironhide. “As useless as the Matrix is, it couldn’t have gone to a better person. Too bad it didn’t actually save him.”

“Yep.” But Ratchet wasn’t sure about that. He remembered Megatron’s new certainty, his total lack of hesitation as he’d turned to defend Ratchet from their attackers. The power of his voice.

But Ironhide was right.

The Matrix hadn’t saved him after all.

“Sorry, doc. It sounds like he was a good kid.”

“Yeah. He was.” Ratchet left it at that.

Ironhide stilled suddenly, listening to some private message over his comm. “Sorry,” he said, after a moment. “Soundwave just got back and wants to see us all immediately. Think you can find your way from here, Doc?”

“Yes. I should be fine,” said Ratchet, and watched Ironhide hurry away. He’d known that Soundwave had been gone, but not why. He still wasn’t sure, but now he was guessing it was something important.

He turned to make his way back to the medical bay, annoyed with himself for mentioning Megatron to a mech he barely knew—and somewhat bewildered by Ironhide’s instant leap to criticism of the Matrix. Ratchet himself was an atheist, and happy in it—but that condemnation seemed so reflexive as to be unsettling. Was this another cultural current he’d missed?

A few minutes brought him to the medical bay itself, somewhat bewildered at First Aid’s absence. Perhaps he was in with a patient.

But there was someone else there, and the changed paintjob made him take an extra few moments to recognize him. The stance, though, the stance gave it away, and Ratchet came to a stop in the middle of the room.

“Pharma?”

He didn’t know if it was relief or horror in his voice. Both, maybe, but Pharma’s feelings seemed totally unequivocal. He turned, saw Ratchet, and beamed, crossed the room rapidly to fold Ratchet into the sort of hug that had once made his spark melt.

Ratchet felt himself stiffen, freeze.

“Ratchet? What’s wrong?”

I don’t know, thought Ratchet. Maybe the part where my own fragging mate kept me a prisoner in our home? Maybe that I couldn’t even mourn the death of my best student, for fear he’d hurt me? Or turn me over to the Functionists? Perhaps that could be it?

He was angry, he realized. Really, really angry. He stepped away from Pharma quickly, hands raised.

“I came looking for you,” said Pharma, plaintively. “You know, it wasn’t exactly safe for me, I don’t have the political connections you did, but when you got kidnapped—and I was sure it was

kidnapped, you wouldn't do that to me, would you? You know the danger you would have put me in, running off? When you got kidnapped, I told them it couldn't be voluntary, that you'd been taken against your will, and they wouldn't listen. I had to flee. I had to disguise myself. And now I'm here, and I'm so glad you're all right..."

He trailed off, noticing the scuffs and dents from practice, and faster than Ratchet could flinch away, Pharma closed the distance between them and was touching the sore spot on his cheek.

"Who the frag put that there?" he said, and the tone of voice was so familiar that it was all Ratchet could do not to cringe.

"Combat practice," he said, and heard the note of desperate appeasement in his own voice. He hated it. Hadn't Ironhide just been teaching him how to beat the slag out of anyone who put a digit on him he didn't want there? Why the frag was he so scared? "It's fine, it's normal."

"They're making you fight?" Pharma sounded horrified. "You're a medic! Your oaths...!"

There were a lot of good reasons, but he owed Pharma none of them. He couldn't really think of any of them, either. Words didn't seem to come in the right order, and so he was silent.

"Oh, Ratchet," said Pharma, and kissed him with all the kindness that he remembered.

Ratchet felt a deep, sickening tug of longing. He'd loved this. He missed this so much it hurt. For the briefest moment, he imagined it was real. That here, away from the poisonous influence of the Functionists, they could once again have what they once had. That things would be, once again, all right.

The Decepticons were more powerful than Starscream had ever imagined.

He was delighted.

Well organized. Well armed. All they lacked was an air force. And he could provide that.

Also, Optimus was very attractive. Just because Starscream hadn't seen the mouth under his faceplate didn't mean he wasn't speculating about what Optimus could do with it.

He was going to become second in command of the Decepticons.

Then, he was going to...

...bide his time. Yes. Until the right opportunity arose. He grinned at Optimus, and leaned across the table, putting everything necessary on display. Wings. Aft. Stunning smile. "So, then, *Lord* Optimus. How soon do you need us...?"

He was eyeing Optimus's right arm as he spoke, mentally measuring its dimensions. For a more practical purpose than one might guess.

He had something in mind, and if Optimus was warrior enough to wield it, nothing would stop the Decepticons on the battlefield.

"As soon as possible," said Optimus, looking down with what looked like sincere delight. Totally oblivious to Starscream's less-than-appropriate musings. He seemed so, well, heroic. Noble. Totally impractical. But Starscream found himself amused by it, like the antics of a foolish animal.

And Optimus had a lot of power at his command. Starscream had to remember that. No fool could have become so powerful.

“Then Vos is yours,” said Starscream aloud, and smiled. Unfortunately, Optimus didn’t seem to quite get the idea. Too bad.

They would have plenty of time to fix that.

Chapter 49

Ratchet looked up at Pharma, hating himself for freezing, hating himself for *hoping*, and not knowing what else he could do.

“I have a ship,” said Pharma. “This isn’t our war. You belong in it even less than I do. There’s a ship, and we can leave. Just the two of us. It’ll be all right.”

Pharma’s hand brushed his, and he flinched violently before he knew what he was doing.

Pharma drew away, eyes narrowing into an expression Ratchet knew all too well. “Ratchet. What’s wrong with you? I’ve come all this way—in *disguise*, Ratchet, you have no idea how dangerous this trip was for me—and you’ve hardly said anything. Are you angry with me?”

Ratchet finally remembered how his fragging vocalizer worked. “Yes.”

“Why would you be angry with me?” Pharma’s voice made him sound hurt. His face told an entirely different story.

This talk was falling into a far too familiar pattern.

Ratchet took a step back.

What Ironhide had told him spun through his processor in a confused jumble, too recent to come instinctively and even then—even if he could remember something of use, he couldn’t do this. Not to Pharma. He was a better mech than that. He wouldn’t strike his mate.

He ran up against his desk.

“What the frag is going on?” demanded Pharma, angry, looked at the expression on Ratchet’s face. “Are...are you frightened of me?”

Ratchet tried to produce a derisive snort. It didn’t succeed.

“Did you think I’d hurt you for leaving?” Pharma was advancing on him. “Ratchet, I’d never do something like that. I knew you were miserable. I just missed you.”

Ratchet realized he’d been bracing himself on the desk, and that his hands were shaking. He tried to focus on the anger. “Liar,” he managed.

The horrified, bewildered expression on Pharma’s face made his spark clench.

Because frag him, he was an idiot, but he still *cared*.

“Remember this?” he demanded, holding up his right wrist. He wasn’t sure if he was talking to himself or Pharma. “I’m still not entirely sure whether you meant to break it. You didn’t, but I’m not sure that was for lack of trying.”

Pharma scowled. The wounded act dropped. “You backstabbing cheat,” he said.

Ratchet couldn’t do any more backing up. There was nowhere to go. He stared up at Pharma, and the horrible helplessness wrapped his spark like a fist.

I can’t hit him. I can’t. That’s not who I am.

Fighting Ironhide was one thing. Ironhide wanted to fight. They weren't actually hurting each other. Hitting Deadlock or one of the others with a wrench, poking one of Overlord's bullies in a neural cluster—fine, he'd done all of the above, but not to cause harm, he knew that the wrench would sting and not even dent, it was closer to well, roughhousing, much like many of his patients did, but not the way that Ironhide was teaching him to cause harm. It was—it wasn't real, not like this, even with Overlord's bullies, *it wasn't a real fight* it wasn't *hitting his fragging mate* even if Pharma was going to hit him first, hurt him again—he wasn't *worth* doing this for. A patient was different.

He appreciated Ironhide's teachings because of his patients.

But he *couldn't hit Pharma*. He wouldn't be himself after that.

Ironhide was teaching him to kill. To use extreme violence on, admittedly, very bad mecha.

Pharma didn't fit that category.

He couldn't deal with a world in which Pharma fit that category.

Pharma stepped in close, and Ratchet felt himself cringe down against the desk, raising an arm to shield his face.

"Primus," said Pharma, lowering his hands and looking defeated. "I come to help you, to save you from these barbarians, even after everything you've done—because I've never done anything you didn't make me do! Even after everything you've done, I still fragging love you, and here you are, doing this, hurting me again after everything!" He seemed to sag. "I don't know why I try, anymore."

Ratchet just stared at him, waiting. He should be more hurt by what Pharma was saying, but he felt distant. The words didn't seem to make an impact, but he knew that later, he would be in pain. It was a strange feeling.

"Just once, Ratchet," said Pharma. "Just once, let me know that you care? About us?"

Ratchet couldn't look at him anymore. He couldn't find anything to say, either.

He'd told himself again and again how angry he was with Pharma. It was easy to be angry with him when he wasn't right there. But as it was, Ratchet now just felt small and ashamed. He wrapped his arms around himself and stared at his feet.

The infirmary doors slid open. Pharma startled away from him; it took Ratchet another moment to react.

"Jazz," he said aloud.

"Hey there doc." Jazz looked the two of them over, smiling cheerfully. "Should I say docs? Anyway. You're Pharma, aren't you? Yeah, can I borrow you for a bit, my mech?"

Pharma looked between him and Ratchet, and Ratchet caught the flash of anger in his eyes. He felt himself go still.

"Required security screening for all new arrivals," said Jazz, who obviously hadn't noticed. "We'll have you back here before you know it."

Pharma hesitated.

“Hate to say it,” said Jazz, still just as light and cheerful, “but it ain’t optional.”

Pharma relented. He reached out for Ratchet, who let him. He couldn’t move. He was still frozen, frozen as Pharma tilted his face up and kissed him again, gently, so so gently.

“We’ll work this out,” Pharma said quietly. “I believe in us.” He smiled the sort of smile that Ratchet thought of as the real Pharma, and added, “I’ll be back before you know it, love.”

Ratchet watched the two of them go, then mechanically went to sit behind his desk.

It took him several files to realize he wasn’t doing any of the paperwork correctly, and after that he just sat there, hands folded to keep them from shaking, and stared at the wall.

Why the frag had he let Pharma kiss him?

Jazz did not care for Starscream one little bit. The little fragger was trouble, already giving Optimus berthroom eyes and fluttering his wings. No one could get that obviously smitten so fast, not even with Optimus.

And now there was Pharma. The scene he’d walked into in the medbay torqued Jazz off past all belief. How could one mech make his lover feel like that, and not notice? Frag that.

Time to nip it in the bud.

“So here’s the part where we get the ground rules nice and clear,” said Jazz, pausing on one of the many catwalks. The base had been a factory, once upon a time, much like the refugee facilities a few blocks over. Pharma peered disdainfully down at him.

Jazz gave him his best *I don’t give a frag* look. “You stay away from Ratchet. I’d suggest you dissolve the *conjunctio*, but really, that’s his decision.”

“Why would you tell me to stay away from my own conjunctio?” said Pharma, sounding wounded, but his optics were icy with rage. Jazz returned his glare with a flat stare of his own.

“Don’t think we don’t know who Ratchet’s handler was while he was...how should I say it... under house arrest? And don’t think I’m not familiar with how to hurt medic-grade hands while leaving minimal marks—or how to tell when it’s been done to someone.” He stepped close to Pharma. “No pretending between us, huh? You hurt him. My guess is, it’s been going on for a while.

“We’re having this out here, like civilized mecha, but let me give you the lowdown on your two choices right now. Actually, I guess there’s three, but I bet you don’t want to strike out on your own just now. Nobody likes you, and the Functionists want your helm. So let’s ignore that.

“Here’s your two choices: You cooperate with me, and stay the frag away from Ratchet, and put those famed surgical skills to work for us... or you come down with a *real* bad case of vanishing without a trace. Got it?”

“Vanishing without a trace?” sneered Pharma. “Is that supposed to be a threat? Because—“

Jazz moved. Twist, trip, pull... And Pharma found himself hanging at the edge of the railing, with only Jazz’s hand keeping him from falling.

“Now,” said Jazz, as Pharma likely discovered that flailing was a very bad idea indeed, “I suppose right now you’re getting the damage reports. Your t-cog is nonfunctional, and your jets are very much disabled. Neural clusters, they’ll slag you every time. Wears off. But not until after you hit the bottom, and to my certain knowledge, there’s a natural smelting pool there.”

“You’re threatening me! Optimus will—,”

“Be veeeeery disappointed in me, I know,” said Jazz. “He’s very disappointed in me fairly frequently. But word of advice; don’t make offlining you any more appealing than it already is, okay? If we weren’t strapped for medics, I’d have done it already. As it is? I’m willing to give you a chance to prove yourself. Isn’t that nice? Very Optimus-y?”

Pharma said nothing. Jazz sighed. “Fine.” He pulled Pharma back up. “See the thanks I get. Review of the rules. Don’t fraggin’ hurt Ratchet, don’t try to get revenge for this, and don’t wind up dead. Sound fair? I think so, and I’m the one who matters. Let’s get you to your actual security debriefing.”

Like frag this would solve the actual problem, Jazz thought as Pharma sullenly preceded him back to the main bulk of the base, but at least it was a start.

Chapter 50

“We need to tell him.”

“You think it’s safe?”

Jazz shrugged. “Safe as it’s gonna get.”

Prowl looked up from the neat pile of memos and reports. Minimus was worth twice his weight in energon. Maybe three times. “You’ve checked him for evidence of shadowplay.”

“I have. Nothing. Look, Prowl, he needs this. It’s not so much about...” Jazz trailed off, glanced significantly downward. “But Ratchet needs something to stabilize him. He’s flailing. It’s tough to get away from someone like Pharma, but Ratchet was already flailing, and we’ve kept this secret too long.”

“We originally agreed to keep it quiet because he was flailing.”

“I know. We were worried about safety. But I think that was a mistake. A big one. You haven’t *met* Starscream, Prowl. Optimus is gonna be in a bad way and quick if he listens to Screamer and the rest of us with him.” Jazz threw himself into Minimus’s seat and groaned. “He’s already dismissing all my concerns.”

Prowl’s doorwings twitched. “Which I’m sure were oh so diplomatic.”

“They were.”

Prowl put down the reports. “I defer to your judgement, Jazz. I must admit, it will be... a relief to no longer be so secretive about this.”

Jazz chuckled. “It’ll make Optimus happy, too.”

“Hm. Let’s go.”

They were back home in a few hours, and Starscream immediately vanished into the old energon preparation facility he’d converted into a lab and began working.

If they were going to defect, they were going to defect in *style*. And he had just the idea for a weapon to make Optimus into the very picture of a warlord—the warlord the Decepticons needed to follow, the warlord who would terrify the Functionist Council. Fusion powered, capable of incredible destruction.

The last, most important of the designs he’d stolen before his expulsion.

Let them burn in the fires of their own weaponry, their own *innovation*.

His revenge was so close to complete, and Optimus would be his means.

Ratchet glared at the two mecha in his office. “This had better be good.” His earlier humiliation with Pharma lent an acidic edge to his voice.

“Trust me, it is,” said Jazz.

Prowl looked at Ratchet, then let out a long breath. “There’s something we need to show you.”

Jazz nodded, jerkily. Ratchet frowned at that. Jazz was usually so composed. “And you’ll have to keep it quiet. It’s only us. We got advice from Aid about it, but didn’t disclose what it was for; we didn’t dare, with the mnemosurgery scars on his neck. But now that you’re here...”

Mnemosurgery. The word brought Ratchet to full alert, and he rose quickly. “Lead the way.”

They did.

It took a long time, what seemed like an endless descent into the depths of the old factory, to where the natural smelting pools it’d been built around seethed and bubbled and filled the air with the smell of boiling metal and death. At long last, Jazz keyed open a door lock, looked back at Ratchet. “We did our best, Ratch,” he said after a moment of hesitation. “And for what it’s worth? I’m sorry. We made a mistake in not bringing you in earlier. But—well, you’ll understand why we were worried about safety. It would be so easy to lose everything. Even after we knew you weren’t shadowplayed, we were worried they might have something on you. And supplies are limited. No one here has your skill. We haven’t even been able to turn on the lights—the CR tank was enough of a risk to hook into the power grid, the lights would leave too much of an energy footprint.”

Ratchet’s dorsal strut prickled with nerves. “Who do you have back there?” He looked between them, both sets of doorwings at tremblingly neutral angles, the graveness of their expressions. It looked normal on Prowl but not on Jazz. A suspicion grew in the back of his processor, a hope, and he stamped it mercilessly back, because the disappointment would break him if he were wrong.

“Better you see for yourself,” said Jazz, and pulled the door open.

There was a CR tank in the center of the room, glowing dimly. For a moment, the contents were completely obscured by the glare from their headlights. Ratchet switched his off, followed by Jazz and Prowl. They waited for their optics to adjust. Ratchet shivered a little, uncomfortable in the humming darkness. Finally, the light from the CR chamber was enough, and Ratchet’s mouth slowly fell open as he tilted his helm up and recognized the dim shape floating within.

He took one step, two steps toward it. Stopped, and glanced over his shoulder at Jazz and Prowl. “It’s really him?” He heard the hitch in his voice, the pain, and optic cleanser stung in his eyes.

“And his spark’s still beating,” said Jazz, almost reverent. “Primus knows how, his spark’s still beating. He’s unconscious... but he still functions.”

Ratchet crossed the room in three swift steps and pressed a hand to the glass of the tank, right over that of its occupant. “Oh *kid*,” he said, two years’ and six months’ worth of sparkbreak in the word, and it was all he could do not to press his forehelm to the glass as well. He was crying, and the elation and agony mixed and became something numb, almost distant, as he stared up at a familiar helm, at the dark optics, the slack mouth and the healing terrible wound through the chest. He’d kept his medical markings, he realized, and it brought a pang to his overwhelmed spark. He’d probably known he was going to his death, and he’d kept his medical markings.

And he was here and he was alive. He was alive. After everything... “Oh kid. Hang on just a little longer. You’re with friends. We’ve got you.” He did lean his forehelm against the tank, drew in a

rough ventilation that wasn't a sob, it *wasn't*. "Hold on, Megatron. We've got you."

Chapter 51

Ratchet turned to Prowl and Jazz, forcing his tone back to something approaching his usual snap. “How long has he been like this?”

“I picked him out of the wreckage,” said Jazz. “I stabilized him as much as I could. But I didn’t want anyone finding him like this. I’m worried someone might try to deal with him for once and for all. And with no ability to bring him back to full functioning...”

Ratchet wanted to be disgusted at the cramped quarters, the ever-present hum of machinery, the fact they’d basically hidden him in a closet, alone in stasis and whatever dreams might torment him. You didn’t feel pain in a CR tank, but sometimes people experienced brief awareness of their surroundings, and the idea of him flickering into consciousness in this dark, lonely room was almost enough to bring the optic cleanser up in Ratchet’s eyes. He patted the tank again, and said nothing, because Jazz was right.

There were too many people who wanted Megatron dead.

“Where are the readings?” he said.

“Transmitted to this datapad,” said Prowl, handing the relevant datapad over. “We didn’t want someone to be easily able to tell how badly injured he was, should they find him.”

Ratchet looked at it. “He’s stable, but I think it’d be easier—and faster—to do direct repairs. I won’t need much; you did a good job stabilizing him, and the CR tank did the rest. Get me something solid to put him on, and these supplies.” He looked up at the tank again. “Repairs, then let him online in his own time. Might take a few days.”

“A few days,” said Prowl, softly, obviously surprised.

“If we have the parts.” Ratchet frowned at both of them. “I’ve noticed that it’s taking an unusually long time to get certain parts, by the way.”

“We’ll do what we can.”

“Good.” Ratchet activated the CR tank’s internal scanners, frowning at the readouts. “Someone give me a datapad so I know what I need to replace.”

Optimus still wasn’t sure what to make of Starscream.

The mech was very handsome, he’d admit that, but he was a little unsettled by how much Starscream wanted him to *notice* he was handsome. The fact that Soundwave tensed up every time the mech entered the room was also unsettling.

Jazz had made no secret of how suspicious he was about the mech, but Jazz disliked half of the other mecha on the command staff. At this point, Optimus was beginning to feel that Jazz was inclined to be unfairly suspicious. He and Pharma had struck up an instant enmity, which deeply confused Optimus. Ratchet had liked Pharma well enough to take him as conjunx, and Optimus trusted Ratchet’s judgement. Even if Pharma was a bit...well, *arrogant* was probably too harsh a term.

He hadn't seen much of Ratchet in several weeks, other than that incident last week when he'd come in in high dudgeon and informed the entire meeting that if no one could get him the fragging spare parts he needed, the army was as good as scrap. He'd seemed especially angry about the lack of fuel tanks—“*A fuel tank, one fuel tank, I will take what I can fragging get!*”—and Optimus had immediately expedited the process. If Ratchet lost his temper so badly about it, it must be important.

Hopefully, Pharma's arrival would make Ratchet something less of a workaholic. Optimus was honestly surprised both of them were spending as much time in the medbay as they were. He'd half-expected for them to vanish into their quarters for the first few weeks. He would have cheered it. Ratchet had been through enough. He deserved something nice.

And now he wished he hadn't thought that, with an equally attractive flyer unsubtly flirting with him.

“Your fists aren't doing enough,” said Starscream bluntly. “Nor that piece of trash masquerading as a standard-issue rifle.”

He seemed *very* pleased with himself. He was also *definitely* hiding something in his subspace.

“I'm listening,” said Optimus, and hoped it wasn't something embarrassing, because this was in the middle of the weekly meeting.

Starscream took the object out of his subspace, and mecha around the table drew in swift breaths and stepped back.

Optimus blinked at the weapon before him.

It was massive. Were he a smaller mech, even Ironhide's size, he would not be able to wield it. It hummed softly, even disconnected from a bearer—and it was meant to be borne, he could see the fasteners that would latch onto his arm.

“It's a fusion cannon,” said Starscream, running a hand over it, and Optimus was horrified at the sheer destructive potential the Seeker held. More so when Starscream began talking about it, all of its horrific capabilities. But then Starscream looked up at him, so pleased with himself, so obviously seeking approval, and he couldn't voice his horror.

Starscream knelt in front of him, and presented him with the cannon. “Lord Optimus,” he said. “Please, accept this—and my loyalty undying.”

Optimus stared at him and the weapon in his upraised hands and words failed him. He didn't know if he could accept this, but as he stood looking down at it, a realization crept into his processor.

He didn't have the luxury of moral qualms now. What Starscream held meant he could defend more of the helpless, more of the civilians, by stopping the Functionists. It was leadership and the confidence of the Decepticons. This terrible thing could be turned around into something good. He thought of the gunships they'd encountered a year back, the city left in utter ruins and the Decepticons helpless to do anything about it. That wouldn't have happened with the weapon Starscream had made for him.

Before he lost his nerve, he reached out and took the cannon, affixing it to his right arm. It was heavy. A burden, and he hoped when this war was over, when he'd fought and won and everything, *everyone* he loved so was safe, he could be rid of it, he could burn the terrible thing.

“Rise, Starscream,” he said. “I thank you. And as for your loyalty... I hope you will never hesitate

to set me on the right path. Unquestioning obedience is not something I would ask of any mech.”

Starscream blinked up at him, then grinned. Optimus was momentarily glad he'd accepted the fusion cannon, because that smile made him realize he hadn't seen Starscream truly happy.

Well, someone had given Optimus a truly appalling new accessory. Arms piled high with materials and on his way down to Megatron's room, Ratchet shot the unnecessarily massive fusion cannon a disgusted look. He'd have words with Optimus later; right now, Megatron had been decanted, mostly repaired, and was expected to wake at any time. He figured the mech would appreciate a paint touch-up. He deserved his full insignia.

Megatron was now laid on a slab, still on spark support. Ratchet had been slowly dialing the settings back; today they'd try to wake him for the first time, and his fuel pump beat fast and hard along with his spark. Megatron was going to be all right. he should be all right. He might be able to say... all the things he'd longed to. Going to be able to tell Megatron his suffering had not been in vain. That they had an army. That the Functionists would be defeated.

Ratchet hated leaving him. Some irrational part of him half-expected Megatron to vanish if he were left alone. That all of this would turn out to be a dream.

His steps sped as he turned a corner into one of the smaller corridors. The Decepticon base was crowded, but here the flow of people ebbed to a handful of mecha, passing by in clumps from the newest barracks. Today. They'd bring Megatron online today, and his fears, his grief, would all be in the past.

Megatron's work hadn't been a waste. It hadn't been in vain. And he could tell Megatron as much.

"Ratchet?"

He flinched. He'd managed to avoid Pharma so far, scheduling his shifts so there was no overlap in onshift, vanishing into the depths of the factory to tend to Megatron on his offshifts, recharging there more often than not.

Pharma, it seemed, was determined.

Pharma *could not* find out about Megatron. Even if his loyalties were unquestionable, he'd hated Megatron enough before. He might try to pull the plug on the CR tank out of simple spite.

"I'm busy," Ratchet said. "What is it?"

"You're avoiding me."

"What part of busy don't you understand?"

"Don't give me that. I know when you're avoiding me, and when you're actually busy. You're not even taking your energon in the mess. What did I do?"

Jazz and Prowl would be waiting for him. This last armful of things was important, the last things Megatron needed to come back online. Every second Megatron lay there galled Ratchet; he could have been brought back online over a year ago with proper help. He deserved better.

"What did I do?"

Ratchet's desperation finally overtook his patience. "You know damn well what you did, Pharma." He made to shove past, and Pharma stopped him with a hard hand on his shoulder.

"Let me go."

The hand tightened to the point of pain. "Don't be ridiculous," said Pharma.

"Let me go!" Ratchet said it loud, hoping someone might hear him. The sadness, the guilt of the last few months were gone. Pharma was between him and a patient. Pharma was hurting him. Pharma would hurt him. His wrist twinged.

"Get out of my way," he said.

"I have something I need to say to *you*, and I'm sick of you dodging it," said Pharma, and leaned in close. "We can talk here, where everyone will find out what a fake you are, or in private, but we will talk, Ratchet."

"Well, you can say it later. I'm busy." Now Ratchet tried stepping back. It wasn't with much success. Pharma moved with him, as if he thought it was a dance.

"Let me go!" Now he heard the edge of panic in his own voice, the way it shrilled. A few heads turned, some of the Decepticons glancing at him with less concern than curiosity. Probably wondering whether the ensuing altercation would be amusing enough to be worthwhile. "Frag off, Pharma, I don't want you, I don't want anything to do with you after what you did! Don't touch me!"

"What you did," said Pharma, evenly.

"You kept me a prisoner," said Ratchet. "You hit me. You--" He ran out of words for what Pharma had done. None of what he'd said encapsulated how trapped he'd felt. How frightened to even *think* he'd been. The terror, the confinement—those were so much worse than any simple pain. "I want to annul the conjunx ritus."

Pharma's face twisted in a snarl. Ratchet braced himself, expecting a hard palm across his face at best. Then Pharma hesitated. Looked around.

They had an audience.

Ratchet's yelling had worked.

Slowly, Pharma's hand loosened on Ratchet's shoulder.

"This isn't over," he hissed. Then, more loudly, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ratchet. I know you're going through a difficult time. I'll be here for you when you need me."

And left.

Ratchet's knees almost gave out. He wobbled on his feet, almost collapsing where he stood.

"Aw," said someone, a big empurata survivor—Whirl, Ratchet thought the name was— "I was hoping for a fight."

Ratchet bowed his head and hurried away.

Chapter 52

"So Jazz is being difficult to you, too," said Starscream, and glanced sidelong at his companion. As another flightframe, albeit a far clunkier and brutish one than a true Seeker, he supposed that Pharma had encountered similar issues as he had. Spending a little time with him seemed like a good idea, planning for the future. After all, every leader needed a good medic.

Starscream had dismissed the other senior medic, Ratchet, out of hand. Ratchet was his own mech. If he jumped any direction, it'd be with Optimus, and Starscream privately doubted the old mech would be doing any jumping at all. Rumor had it Megatron's death had hit the old relic hard, and he was still deep in mourning. There'd been some murmuring about an almost-botched surgery. No. Ratchet was of no use to him.

"Yes," said Pharma, sneering into his ration. Starscream felt much the same. Didn't they know that flightframes required *good* fuel?

"He can be very difficult," said Starscream. "And rude."

"He forbade me from seeing my conjunx," said Pharma.

"Your conjunx? Why?"

Pharma glanced sidelong at him, took a long drink from the cube, and said in a way he probably thought was very cunning and subtle, "Ratchet hasn't been much himself since his apprentice offlined so...publicly. And I fear Jazz has taken some of his more... inaccurate exclamations far too seriously."

Starscream hadn't heard that. He eyed Pharma, considering the claim.

"It's like he's gone mad!" Pharma slammed his cube down and put his helm in his hands. "I thought he loved me," he said. "And now...and now he's claiming all these things? I came all this way for him, I sacrificed my career to do this and...and he doesn't even want me anymore."

It could simply be that Ratchet was, as Pharma said, being difficult and irrational from grief. There could be a good reason Ratchet wanted nothing to do with Pharma. Starscream didn't care. Here was the leverage he needed.

Starscream put a sympathetic arm around the good doctor. "And Jazz won't let you have a moment alone with him," he said.

"Not one second," said Pharma, miserably.

Starscream *tsk'd* sympathetically. "I am so sorry," he said. "I think I might be able to help, if it's not too presumptuous."

Pharma looked at him out of the corner of his optics. The grief, Starscream guessed, was largely an act. He didn't care. "You could do that?"

"Yes," said Starscream. "How about I distract our dear friend the spy while you go make things right with your *conjunx*?"

It was much later that evening.

Ratchet finished the last of the retouches, restoring Megatron to the last paintjob he'd had in the clinic. He'd hesitated over the medic's insignia, wondering whether it was appropriate to fill in the center of the broken cross with blue, to indicate an apprentice. Megatron had been very nearly ready to take his final oral exams when he'd received the Matrix, and Ratchet would have preferred him to wake up as if he'd already passed them. In the end, though, he applied the blue. Constancy, perhaps, was better. Even if there was no way he'd ever give his defense in front of a ten-member board, as required by tradition and law. Unless this was a far shorter war than anyone guessed.

Now all Ratchet could do was sit, and wait.

Slowly, slowly, the vital signs ticked up as Megatron's frame began to vent on its own, as his t-cog found its bite once again, as his systems functioned on their own, for the first time in years.

Ratchet sat and watched, a fist pressed to his mouth.

The vents grew strong enough to hear. Things clicked on, one after another, the chorus of hums and whirrs and whines of a functioning Cybertronian body. Megatron's fingers twitched, just a little, and Ratchet caught at his hand, holding it in both of his own, and waited.

His optics lit.

"Megatron?" Ratchet said. "Can you hear me?"

Megatron looked at him.

Ratchet needed no other answer. He clutched Megatron's hand, fingers tightly interwoven with the other mech's and let out a sharp vent. "Oh, thank Primus," he whispered.

Megatron's mouth worked, as if he were trying to talk and couldn't remember how. Ratchet scanned him, reflexively, and found nothing other than disuse. "You're okay," he said. "Just take your time. You're okay."

Megatron managed a little nod in response, resetting his vocalizer several times in a row with an audible click. His hands moved against the sides of the berth.

"Don't you dare try to sit up," said Ratchet, firmly.

Megatron reset his vocalizer again, produced a blat of static, and said, "Terminus."

Ratchet's spark sank. "I'm so sorry," he said. "If he's alive, he hasn't been found. Megatron..."

Megatron looked at him. He was angry, Ratchet could tell. Then he blinked, let out a long vent.

"I understand why you did it," he said. Grieved. Tired. And yes, understanding. The understanding was the worst part.

"It kept you alive," said Ratchet. "I'm so sorry. But it kept you alive, and we need you alive."

"I know." Now Megatron did try to sit up. He sagged a few moments later, collapsing hard onto the slab and shivering.

"Thermal insulator," said Ratchet, and tucked one around him.. He clutched at it, the shivering getting worse, not better. Ratchet scanned him twice more; nothing past the expected weakness and motor reintegration. The shivering was probably a mix of his thermal regulators figuring out how to function again, spasms in the motor systems, and emotional reaction.

"We both killed him," Megatron said. His voice faltered. "You gave them the idea, but I..."

"The Functionists did," said Ratchet. "His death isn't on your conscience. Mine, maybe, but not yours."

"I made the choice between his life, and that speech," said Megatron.

"I know." Ratchet's own voice cracked on the words. "It was incredibly brave of you. And I think he would have approved."

"He did," said Megatron. "They let us have a little time together. To make it harder. He...made it clear. And the Matrix made it clear as well."

He scrubbed the back of a hand across his optics. "It will keep me from ever being shadowplayed again," he said softly. "But I don't know if it's worse. It might be worse. It changed me too. I knew I agreed. But it still changed me."

Ratchet put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

The corner of Megatron's mouth lifted in something too grim to be a smile. "I didn't expect you to be able to say much more than that," he said. "Still, thank you."

It was awkward, and one-armed, and Megatron stiffened with his optics all but bugging out, but Ratchet leaned over and hugged him. "Primus, kid. I thought you were dead. I'm so glad you're alive. I'm so, so glad."

Slowly, Megatron raised a shaking arm and patted his back, awkwardly. "You just miss having someone to wash the glassware," he said.

Ratchet rapped his knuckles against Megatron's helm. "Don't joke," he growled. "Don't fragging joke."

Megatron just patted him again with a long-suffering sigh. Stupid kid was trying to take care of him. Ratchet closed his optics and held onto him.

He was alive. That's what mattered. That's what mattered more than anything else.

"How long?" said Megatron.

"Two years."

Megatron let out a hiss of breath, and tried to sit up again. He was big enough he almost succeeded, lifting Ratchet with him. "You repaired me because you need me," he said, abruptly all business. "I can't stay here. What happened?"

"I woke you because I'd finally found you," said Ratchet, "and you can stay here until I'm sure you're not going to stumble off of one of the many overdramatic catwalks around here and into a smelting pool. As for what happened..."

He trailed off. Megatron pushed firmly on his shoulder so he had to take a step back, breaking the

embrace.

He wasn't entirely sure he liked being eyeballed by his former—or current, he wasn't sure—apprentice. There was something too evaluating in Megatron's optics, something he hadn't seen before, an examination that pared him down to the spark.

Megatron let go. "Sit down, Ratchet," he said, not unkindly. "When did you last fuel?"

"You became impertinent when—"

Megatron raised an eyebrow at him.

Ratchet slowly produced the cubes he'd brought down.

"You. Drink one," said Megatron. "I don't have to scan you to know you're exhausted. Sit down and refuel and tell me what happened."

Ratchet sighed, handed the cube with the appropriate portion of medgrade in it to Megatron, and obeyed. "I missed most of it up until a few months ago," he said. "I was in Pharma's custody until then."

Megatron made a sound between a sympathetic murmur and a threatening growl.

"Optimus took over your writings, and then, when it came to fighting, he started leading the rebels. He wound up naming them the Decepticons, in honor of your last words. An absolutely stupid name, in my opinion, but he's very proud of it. Optimus—sorry, you knew him as Orion, didn't you? He changed his name while you were unconscious—is too damn trusting and a batch of these 'decepticons' are little more than Overlord's old bullies. We just got a bunch of Vosians, too. They're a bad, bad lot, and Jazz hates them."

"Jazz?"

"One of the intelligence officers responsible for your rescue. The other mech who's been doing the work is his mate, Prowl. He's running the refugee camp."

"Good. How soon can I—"

"When you're not going to get flattened by the first bruiser with a chip on his shoulder," said Ratchet. "Sorry, Megatron, but you're not in the best shape right now. You need to refuel, recharge, and start getting used to moving again. If the Functionists—or their agents—find out you're alive, they'll kill you."

"I can recharge later," said Megatron, downing the cube quickly, and then gulping a few times, looking nauseous. "I just spent the last two years sleeping, I think that's the last thing I need."

"You know perfectly well that healing is hard work," snapped Ratchet. "And don't drink that too fast, your tank will take a while to get used to anything, including medical grade."

Megatron made a face at him. "I *know*."

"Stop being so impatient, then, and listen to your doctor. You know how annoying it was with Orion and Drift doing this."

Megatron let out a long vent and smiled crookedly at Ratchet. "I consider myself appropriately chastised," he said. "I will be a good patient."

"You'd better."

They were silent a little longer. After a few moments, Megatron reached out and put a gentle hand on Ratchet's forearm once again, a significant gesture from one so adverse to touch. Ratchet smiled his appreciation.

"I'm sorry," said Megatron.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"I can't finish my training. I can't take the Oath."

"But..." Ratchet looked at him with distress and concern. He'd fought so hard for this. To hear him simply surrender...

"I killed Overlord," said Megatron, more firmly. "Intentionally, for all that you might judge it self defense, but I went to him that night to kill him. I don't regret it. Nothing else would make it stop. Nothing else I was willing to give, and all those lives sacrificed by his hand for me would yet be online had someone taken a blade to his spark earlier. The Matrix... makes it clear that this is a decision I will be called on to make again, and again, and again. I will not be an oathbreaker like Pharma." His mouth twisted on that last word. "I wish, with all my spark, that I might simply be a medic. But I cannot."

"It would be difficult to assemble a board for your exams anyway," said Ratchet unhappily. "But Megatron, you deserve *something*. I would have pushed for your boards within the next year, more likely the next two months."

"I am highly complimented."

"Perhaps we might manage something, some workaround," said Ratchet. He couldn't believe he was suggesting it, but he'd so wanted to repaint those insignia. He'd so wanted to raise Megatron to his feet and praise him and to finally, finally have their efforts pay off.

Megatron smiled sadly at him. "Do not compromise your ethics on my account, doctor," he said. His hand tightened. "Not ever. Promise me that."

"I do," said Ratchet. He looked at the mech smiling at him, mouth crooked, the lines around it carved deep for all his relative youth, and realized the Megatron he'd known was no more. Had been no more the moment he'd accepted the Matrix. Oh, there was something of the mech there, but the person looking back at him was shockingly unlike the young, quiet, uncertain apprentice he'd taken on. This Megatron had lived a whole other life in the mines, had been brave enough to write, knowing full well what might happen to him. This Megatron also had the Matrix, a source of (rumored, Ratchet appended) great wisdom, and apparently great confidence as well. He didn't know this mech. Not as well as he thought he did. He'd only grown to know a fraction of him, broken and hurting from a violation so complete words failed.

He felt abruptly awkward.

"Ratchet?" said Megatron softly, looking up at him. "Do I need to order you into a berth? Have you been recharging at all?"

"Stop fretting over me," said Ratchet, too harshly. "I'll be fine."

Megatron laughed a little, though he didn't sound convinced. "I'm sure you will. Get some rest too. I won't be going anywhere."

It was, somehow, exactly what Ratchet needed to hear. Illogical as it was, he felt something unwind within him. He managed a smile, a real one, for the first time in what felt like eons. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Chapter 53

Ratchet slipped outside once Megatron fell back into recharge, though not without Megatron objecting to him not *also* recharging. He rolled his eyes a little at that. Kid got the Matrix and suddenly thought he knew best. Figured.

He needed to ask Jazz if anyone had heard anything of Terminus.

Where was Jazz?

Ratchet looked around, perplexed.

Jazz should have been here by now. They'd arranged to meet. Jazz was usually punctual.

He moved a little further on, wondering if he should actually take Megatron's advice and use his makeshift recharge station after all. He didn't want to leave Megatron totally unattended. He was still terrified one of the Functionists' thugs would find out he was present and kill him. Frag, if Pharma found out, he might kill Megatron from simple spite.

Ratchet shuddered at that thought. Pharma and Megatron in the same room had never been a pleasant prospect. Now, he wasn't entirely sure what Pharma was capable of.

He had to keep them separate. For Megatron's sake.

There were footsteps above him. He looked up, and just saw a pair of headlights moving toward him down one of the ramps. "Jazz?" he called.

"Not here right now, unfortunately," the newcomer said.

Ratchet took a step back, looking for somewhere to go. A few meters behind him was the room where they were keeping Megatron, probably the old supervisors' office. There was a catwalk most of the distance; most of the ambient light here was from the handful of natural smelting pools far, far below. He'd paused on one of the widening of that catwalk, where two or three mecha could have gathered without fear of stopping all foot traffic.

The voice—the far too familiar voice—was coming from the stairway up ahead.

He couldn't pretend he wasn't here. Pharma had heard him respond.

He had to lead Pharma away.

He took a step forward, then another. He could...persuade Pharma to have this conversation elsewhere. He tried to ping Jazz. It went to a mailbox. Prowl. Prowl was also unavailable.

He stopped before messaging First Aid. What was the sense in bringing him in on this? It wasn't as if he could do anything to help him.

"What are you doing down here?" he demanded.

"Trying to talk to you," said Pharma, sounding aggrieved. "Ratchet, why can't you even let me do that much?"

"Because talking hardly ever stays talking with you," Ratchet said, but there was uncertainty in his voice and Pharma certainly heard it. His optics brightened and he moved closer.

“Are you afraid of talking?” he asked. “Ratchet? You? Of all people?”

He stepped closer still. “Are you afraid of what I might say?”

“I’ve already said all I meant to,” said Ratchet. “I want to dissolve the ritus, Pharma.” He took a step forward, though every servo in his frame screamed not to. “I don’t want this. Not anymore. But if we need to have this conversation, we’re not having it here.”

Pharma grabbed his wrist, hard enough to hurt. “No, we’re having it here. We’re having it *now*, before you can sneak away from it *again*.”

“Fine,” said Ratchet, not resisting. Pharma’s voice had risen. He had a nightmare image of Megatron waking, coming out here to help—Megatron still weak from his ordeal, with no combat training, with no *weapons*. Pharma had weapons now, little shoulder-mounted things, but *Megatron had none*. “Fine. Okay. We’ll have it here.”

Pharma stepped in close. “Why are you avoiding me?” he demanded. “You say you want to dissolve the ritus, but now *why*. What did I do, Ratchet?”

“I—” Ratchet resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. He needed to respond. He needed to say something but anything he said might make Pharma louder, might wake Megatron, might make Pharma angry, here where there was no one else to see. He looked up at Pharma looming over him and was afraid. “You worked for the Functionists. To keep me controlled. And you hurt me, Pharma. I don’t want this anymore.”

Pharma moved closer yet, bringing their plating into contact. Ratchet gasped and tried to move away, but Pharma put a firm hand on his waist, keeping him in place.

“We can fix this,” he said. “If we’re willing to work on it. Ratchet, we were both under a lot of stress. I admit I lost my temper more than I should have, even with you being difficult. But I’m willing to work on *us*. Won’t you give me that chance?”

“If you want that chance, you can start by *letting go of me*,” said Ratchet, and then flinched. That had been stupid.

Pharma just looked at him, puzzled.

He didn’t let go.

“We can’t throw all of this away because of your bad temper,” he said, reasonably. “I know losing... Megatron hurt you badly, Ratchet. But let’s not allow that to destroy *us*.” He leaned in close and kissed the center of Ratchet’s chevron.

“I want to dissolve the ritus,” said Ratchet, dully. He hadn’t even managed a flinch.

“Why won’t you say something else?” Pharma shook him. Not hard, not as hard as he could have, but Ratchet tensed, expecting a blow next. “Ratchet, I’m trying to talk to you! I’m trying to find out why! You can’t just throw me away without giving me a second chance! Primus, you’re just as bad as everyone said—you use people, you make them care, and then when you lose interest, out! Gone! And you move on without even a goodbye.” His face darkened. “You would have done the same to Megatron, too, and you know it,” he said. “As soon as he disappointed you, failed to live up to your arbitrary, artificially high standards, you would have gotten rid of him.”

“Leave him out of this!”

“That’s the first genuine response I’ve had out of you in *weeks*,” snarled Pharma. “And it’s about *him*! Can’t you tell I’m talking about *us*? Primus, Ratchet, you’re *impossible*.”

“You hit me, Pharma,” said Ratchet. “Many times. I’m done. I don’t want to talk anymore. I’m just—I’m done.”

“Well I’m not,” said Pharma. “It’s not just about how you feel, it’s about how I feel. A relationship is a two-way street, Ratchet, stop being selfish.”

“If I’m so selfish why the frag are you not just letting me go?” Ratchet demanded, and tried to struggle. That was a mistake.

Pharma shoved him. He lost his balance, catching at the railing desperately. Pharma pressed up against him.

“Stop it!” said Pharma. “Just—stop! Stop putting me in these positions!”

“I’m not,” said Ratchet. “I’m *not*, you keep coming after me. All I want—Pharma, all I want is to be left alone. To...to move on. I don’t, I can’t... I can’t be with you anymore, I can’t deal with this anymore, just let me go on.”

“You don’t want to give this up,” said Pharma. “That’s a lie and you know it. I’ll show you.”

This is when Ironhide would tell you to fight, said a little voice within Ratchet.

He couldn’t.

He couldn’t be that mech. Even as a hand groped at his panels, he couldn’t be that mech.

And to think, he’d believed he’d be free of this, coming here.

A harsh sob escaped his vocalizer. It startled Pharma, who paused with a hand still on him.

“I’m not hurting you,” he said, sounding puzzled.

Ratchet sobbed again, clamped his free hand over his mouth to try to stop it. He couldn’t.

“Ratchet?” said Pharma, now hesitant, and Ratchet put his back to the pole behind him and curled down around himself, hating himself and miserable. *I should be able to fight!* he snarled at himself, and he couldn’t, because it was Pharma. The day they’d sealed the conjunx ritus had been the happiest of his life. How could he *hurt* Pharma?

Pharma backed off by a step, and then another, and Ratchet could feel the weight of his stare on his armor.

“Do you really think I would do that to you?” Pharma said at last. He sounded hurt and angry. “I just wanted—oh, Primus, Ratchet, I just wanted *you* again. I miss what we had.”

A tentative hand touched the top of his helm. “You have to talk to me sooner or later, Ratchet. We have to sort this out.”

Ratchet shook his helm.

Pharma’s touch withdrew again and he turned away. He took a step, then another. Paused. Ratchet tensed, dreading hearing Pharma turn around and come back.

“It’s not fair that you leave me to do all the work in this relationship,” said Pharma. And with that, he was gone.

Ratchet curled tight around himself and hated himself even more.

Starscream had delayed him and Jazz was worried. Nothing Starscream had his filthy fingers in boded well for anyone, especially him. He was terrified that somehow Starscream had found out and gotten to Megatron, or Ratchet, or...

He sped down into the labyrinth, losing patience and, instead of using the stairs and catwalks like a sane mech, leapt between them, dropping himself downwards as fast as he dared. He landed on the correct level with a resounding clang and rose.

There was Ratchet, back pressed against the cubicle they were housing Megatron in, pinching the bridge of his nose and hunched small and miserable. Jazz frowned. That wasn’t right.

“Ratchet?” he said.

Ratchet flinched violently. “Primus, kid, make a little noise, would you?”

“I’ll try,” said Jazz, now seriously worried. He squatted next to Ratchet. “Megs asleep in there?”

“Yeah.” Ratchet stared into space.

“He doing okay?”

“Yeah.”

“*You* doing okay?”

Ratchet leveled a glare at him, then looked away. “Yeah.”

“Something happened.” Jazz lowered himself out of the squat, sitting on the decking. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Fine.” So it was Pharma. Jazz flipped to his low-light filters and looked Ratchet over. Yup, those were scuffs. Great. Starscream and Pharma working together—because why else would Starscream have suddenly wanted to consult him so urgently?

And Optimus seemed to *like* Starscream.

Optimus probably also liked Pharma. Optimus was horribly susceptible to a pair of miserable optics and a sob story. Jazz very much hoped that Optimus would believe Ratchet if he accused Pharma of bad behavior, but if *Jazz* accused Pharma of bad behavior on Ratchet’s behalf, Optimus would give him a disappointed look and say that he was unhappy that Jazz was stirring up trouble.

“Ratch, whenever you need anything, I’m here,” he said aloud. “You’re important. You’re our best doctor, and we need you. You’re worth help.”

“Don’t you dare pity me, kid,” snapped Ratchet. “I already told you, nothing happened.”

“Yeah, and whenever you need help dealing with that nothing, your friends are here.”

Ratchet stood. “If you’re going to badger me…”

Jazz stood as well, raising his hands open palmed. That was a mistake, he realized, as Ratchet flinched. He didn’t move for a bit, so Ratchet could see that it wasn’t meant to be aggressive.

“Badgering done, I swear. Sorry. You need to talk shop, I assume?”

The relief that crossed Ratchet’s face was distressing to see.

"He's recharging well," he said. "He's alive. He's all there--though he's been through Pit. Did either you or Prowl learn anything about what happened to Terminus?"

“Who’s that?”

Ratchet jerked his head in the direction of the makeshift hospital room. "His lover."

"Nothing at all," said Jazz, ransacking his memory banks. "Might have heard something about a miner being brought in as leverage against him, but no names. And after the destruction of the Primal Bascila, no one really checked those ruins for bodies. I'd guess he's under there somewhere."

Ratchet looked over his shoulder and sighed.

"I know," said Jazz. "I couldn't imagine losing Prowler. Give me a description, I'll ask my folks to keep an eye out, but no promises. Let me know when we can meet him."

"When he wakes up," said Ratchet.

There was a quiet groan and thump, the sound of shuffling footsteps, and were it the face of someone other than their legendarily grumpy chief medical officer, the facial shift from *oh no* to *outrage* would have been amusing. As it was, Jazz had to stop his stealth mods from automatically engaging.

“Sounds like he’s awake,” he said aloud, as Megatron appeared in the doorway.

He looked much the same as when Jazz had last seen him upright, but the Megatron then had been angry, helpless, and confused. This one was tired—he could see the weariness in the droop of the mech’s frame—but relaxed. Grieved, yes, but there was a smile in his optics as he looked at Ratchet, one that vanished almost immediately as he noticed the scuffs. His attention then turned to Jazz, and the suspicion there almost made his stealth mods engage *again*.

“Not me,” Jazz said quickly, stepping back. “How’re you feeling?”

“I know you,” said Megatron firmly. “You were one of the Senate guards. You’re the one who told me to survive.”

“It looks like you did,” said Jazz. He held out a hand. “We’ve got a lot to catch you up on, mech.”

Megatron took it, and Jazz kept his face blank as it was squeezed just a little past the point of comfort. Somehow Jazz got the impression that Megatron remembering him wasn’t actually that good a thing. He couldn’t blame the mech. It wasn’t like they’d met under good circumstances, or in all that friendly a way. He wondered if it might help things a little if he shared the knowledge that the guards who’d thought it’d be cute to threaten a prisoner with sexual assault had wound up “mysteriously” dead.

Or if an immediate assertion of his innocence would make Megatron more suspicious of him rather than less.

“Ratchet?” said Megatron, and knelt in front of Ratchet to look up at his face and arms. Jazz was secretly amused; it was exactly what one should do to avoid leaning over a smaller mech when one didn’t want to be intimidating, the sort of thing he trained all of his people working rescues to do. And by Ratchet’s expression? Ratchet had taught Megatron to do that, and was torqued off to see it aimed at him. “You’re injured.”

“I fell,” said Ratchet gruffly.

“Like Pit you did,” said Megatron. He looked at Jazz. “How recently did Pharma arrive?”

“*Megatron*,” said Ratchet, with a warning growl in his voice.

“Um,” said Jazz, looking between them. “Couple days ago.”

“*Jazz*,” said Ratchet, in the same tone. Jazz gulped, and wondered how the frag Megatron managed to be totally unmoved by that.

Megatron turned his attention back to Ratchet. “I’ll let the matter lie if you wish,” he said. “But you do not have to put up with this.”

Ratchet looked away.

Jazz stayed quiet. There was no way he could help with this.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to him,” whispered Ratchet. “I want to be left alone. To work out how I feel.”

Jazz was pretty certain Ratchet knew how he felt, but nodded. “I understand, mech. We’ll make sure that happens.”

“We should move Megatron,” said Ratchet, sounding more purposeful. “Pharma came too close to finding him.”

“I agree entirely,” said Megatron. “But not to another hiding place.” He looked from one to the other, squared his shoulders, and said, “I want to meet my Decepticons.”

Chapter 54

He was still shaky, motor systems desperately integrating and syncing again after years of disuse. But it was better than lying in that room alone, thinking of Terminus. It was better than going back to being still and passive with the memory of Ratchet's scuffs fresh in his processor.

He was angry. He put it carefully to the back of his mind. It would come when called.

"I'm not sure your equilibrium is in good enough shape for this," said Ratchet.

"It will do," said Megatron, giving him an easy smile.

As they climbed upward, it occurred to Megatron that he might have been slightly overstating his abilities. Like Pit he was admitting it, though. He would not be kept down in the depths of what seemed to be an old warehouse, coddled and useless. He'd spent too long that way already.

Even if every strut of him ached. Even if he was still shivering.

"Stop a second," said Ratchet, in tones that brooked no argument. Megatron stopped, and bent at Ratchet's frown, allowing Ratchet to tuck a thermal insulator around him like a cloak. He clasped it with one hand.

It helped, a little. "Thank you."

"You have to learn to take care of yourself," Ratchet grouched.

Megatron chuckled and turned back to climbing the stairs. They seemed endless. How the frag had Jazz gotten a CR tank down here? How the frag had Jazz gotten *him* down here?

"You need to stop and rest?" Jazz asked.

"No, not yet," said Megatron, wincing at his own pride. "Ratchet?"

"I didn't just get off my deathbed," said Ratchet, obviously annoyed. It made Megatron smile. That was as good as a declaration of affection.

He'd missed Ratchet.

Even knowing Terminus was almost certainly dead, he was glad Ratchet was here.

Primus, please let Terminus have died quickly. Please let Trepan not have been able to follow through on his threats. Megatron closed his eyes a moment, holding tight to a railing. His spark curled small inside him, grieved and lonely. Terminus had spurred him to revolution. How could he lead in his absence?

He'd find a way, Megatron told himself, and squared his shoulders.

The other fear struck him as he resumed his climb. What had the Matrix done to him?

He hadn't had time to be afraid of that at the time. He'd received the Matrix, woken in pain and the certain knowledge of a task to be done, and then fought the Senate guard and failed. From there—Primus, it had only been a handful of terror-filled hours between receiving the Matrix and when he'd been shot. When he should have died, had it not been for Jazz and Ratchet, and he'd spent none of them wondering what exactly he'd been made into.

The weight around his spark was irritatingly silent at that thought.

It had modified him physically. The pain of his optics bursting was still in the back of his mind. He could still taste them if he thought too hard about it. His hands were still heavily clawed. That much at least was apparent—but he wasn't sure about his mind. He could remember his words returning. Renewed certainty.

But had it repaired him? Or had it been one more modification to his mind against his will? Trepan again—but in a different direction.

“Ratchet,” he said aloud, trying to focus on his anger instead, “what happened to Trepan?”

“Killed while attacking someone within the base,” said Jazz, ahead of him. Megatron frowned at the back of his head; he still wasn't too sure of the mech's allegiances, particularly since when he'd last seen him, Jazz had been at the head of a column of guards arresting him. “Soundwave did it. We've already melted down the body or I'd show you.”

Megatron wished he'd gotten to kill the mech himself. He could remember all too well the feeling of needles in his brain, Trepan laughing at his pain and fear and gouging deeper. “Thank you,” he said aloud and kept walking.

“Are you sure you should be walking?” said Ratchet. “We could wait for morning.”

“I don't want to wait for morning,” said Megatron. “I'm sure I can recover just as well up there as down here, and I've slept long enough.”

That, at least, Ratchet couldn't argue with. He'd been insisting on moving him, after all. Megatron was shamefully glad of it. He couldn't imagine spending longer in that room.

He was very much hoping for this endless climb to be over, though.

“Almost there,” said Jazz, and turned a corner and opened a door.

Megatron pushed past him and stopped where he stood, staring.

Even this late at night, there were so many of them. All hurrying, as if they had places to be. His head turned, watching them go past. “They're all Decepticons?” he said.

“All of them,” said Ratchet. “Everyone here is here to fight the Functionists.”

They stood a chance, Megatron realized, looking at them all. A chance. For once. He felt the beginning of a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. “All of them? There are so many of them. I never dreamed—I never *thought*...” His words eluded him, a moment of almost panic. “You—all of you did this? Because...” He trailed off, not quite daring to voice his part in this, and looked back at the hurrying Decepticons.

“Your fall was one thing too many,” said Jazz softly from his other side. “The death of the first Prime to speak for them. For us. It was unbearable. And Optimus led us.”

“Optimus,” said Megatron, trying the name, and then laughed softly. “About time he came into the light, after all his writings.”

“Look who's talking,” said Ratchet, and elbowed him gently. “Come on, let's get you to Optimus before you cause a traffic jam. You're something of a celebrity here and you're supposed to be dead.”

“Two marks against me,” said Megatron, and followed Ratchet’s lead.

Despite Ratchet’s urgings, they did attract attention. People started to stop and stare and mutter. Megatron took pleasure in looking back with open curiosity, as he never would have dared under Trepan’s influence. Many warframes here, and he feared he recognized some of Overlord’s enforcers in the crowd.

“Jazz, we’re getting stared at...” said Ratchet, clearly uneasy. Megatron wondered if he was aware he was pressing in closer to him. He wouldn’t mention it. It would offend Ratchet’s pride, and he was more than capable of protecting him should it come to that.

That confidence was absolutely the Matrix at work. He hadn’t been much good at fighting before he’d gotten it. Indeed, he remembered hiding under tables. That brawl with Drift had gone surprisingly well, though.

“What happened to Drift?” he asked Ratchet.

“He goes by Deadlock now,” said Ratchet. “He’s one of the frontliners.”

There was a tightness to Ratchet’s mouth that Megatron did not like. He would ask later. In the meantime, he looked around the crowd.

“Megatron?” said a familiar voice. There was movement in the crowd, and when Megatron looked, relief broke over him in a wave. “Impactor?”

“Glad to see the fraggers couldn’t kill you,” said Impactor, and pushing Jazz and Ratchet aside, hauled Megatron in for a borderline painful hug. “Probably too much to hope that Terminus made it out too, huh?”

Megatron’s vents hiccuped at that, surprise and grief together. “Not that I know of. How did you know him?”

“Hid him when they came for him. It’s good to see you.” Impactor moved away, thumping Megatron on the shoulder again. Then he looked up. “Guess the reunion’s over. You’ve got people to talk to.”

Megatron looked up, too. The crowd was parting and at the end of it...

Was Orion. Optimus. Whatever he was calling himself. And others. A flyer he guessed was Starscream. Someone in Enforcer’s paint. The symbiont host he remembered from the night he killed Overlord.

“I wish we could have done this more formally,” said Ratchet, and Megatron realized he was still clutching the thermal insulator around himself, probably still looked like he’d just crawled out of the CR tank.

Optimus had frozen, staring at him, optics wide. Megatron stared back at him, taking in the purple brands on his arms, the new wounds and scars, and, most disturbingly, the massive cannon on his arm. It didn’t look right on him.

There was a stir of interest from the Matrix where it nestled around his spark, unsettling and alien. He pushed it aside.

Then he stepped forward, searching for an appropriate remark. Optimus didn’t give him a chance.

His mask snapped back, revealing a growing smile. “Ratchet, is it really...?”

“It’s really,” said Ratchet, with only a fraction of his usual grumble.

Optimus crossed the space between them in a handful of quick steps. He put a hand on Megatron’s shoulder, smiled at him—then pulled him into a tight hug and a firm kiss.

Megatron froze, shocked. Of course Optimus would only remember that one night together. Of course Optimus didn’t know he’d seen Terminus again. Even if Terminus was almost certainly dead, it didn’t make Megatron feel any less of a traitor for having Optimus’s arms around him and Optimus’s mouth on his.

But the feeling of another mechanism holding him was also good. He’d never been fond of physical affection, but just now it grounded him in the present, something to hold onto he sorely needed.

Optimus stepped back and looked down at him. “I’m so glad to see you, old friend.”

“I am glad to see you as well,” said Megatron, scrabbling for composure—he realized belatedly that he’d released the insulator at some point and it was now at their feet, and he was still cold. He hadn’t been online long enough to recover the heat that he’d lost in stasis, and the long slow process of bringing himself up to normal operating temperatures was still in progress. He was now stopping himself from shivering by force of will.

Perhaps he should have let them move him somewhere else within the bowels of the base; he certainly wasn’t enjoying this as his first introduction to *his* movement.

“What happened?” said Optimus more quietly, and Megatron lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “You’d have to ask Jazz and Ratchet. I’ve only been online for...” he checked his chronometer, “less than 24 hours.”

Optimus stared over his shoulder at Jazz and Ratchet, neither of whom looked the least bit ashamed. Jazz stepped forward before Ratchet could. “He was in delicate condition,” he said. “We couldn’t risk the news getting out. I’m sure the Functionists would have liked to finish what they’d started.”

“Risking losing him a second time wasn’t something I was willing to do,” Ratchet put in, and he sounded angry. “I’m sure you understand.”

“I do,” said Optimus. He looked up and looked around, still smiling, handsome with his faceplate uncovered. “Decepticons! Megatron Prime has returned. Let this show that no matter what the Functionists do to us, they will never succeed in truly destroying us!” He took Megatron’s hand and raised it high, and Megatron forced something like a smile.

He didn’t like this. No matter how happy the faces of the mecha around him were, he didn’t like this, because they were celebrating his survival with not a word about Terminus. He’d survived, by virtue of Jazz’s interference, because of the Matrix, and the person who most deserved this, Terminus, lay dead and forgotten.

And he wasn’t sure what to say about it, because if he did say something, he’d seem mad and that was not something he was willing to risk in an entirely new place surrounded by entirely new mecha, more than a few of whom were most certainly enemies.

So he forced his smile and stood there next to Optimus, feeling angry and tired and confused and listened to them cheer. They were *his* movement, of that he was sure, and he barely knew them.

At least he was still online.

Even if someone had gotten to Trepan first, he could still make the Functionists pay. There was a role for him here, and he would find a way to play it, one way or another.

Ratchet walked with Megatron back to his rooms. He'd been rated for a private one, at least, even if it often seemed more like a coffin than a room, but there was a spare bunk in it that could quickly be converted into a recharge slab.

He didn't much want to be left alone just now, and he suspected that Megatron didn't either.

"Well?" he said when they were in private. "Now you've met the Decepticons. What did you think?"

Megatron glanced at him, thoughtful. "It's not as if I've had enough time to learn about them," he said.

"Don't play the diplomat with me," said Ratchet. "I take it you weren't expecting Optimus's greeting, either."

"I should have," said Megatron. "As far as he knows, he picked up where we left off. But he's wrong. I can't very well start something with him again, not with Terminus so recent." He sighed heavily, glanced sidelong at Ratchet and sat down on the spare bunk. "It seems so close and yet so distant. As far as I'm concerned, I woke up after a long night. Yesterday morning, I was worrying about your reaction to Optimus courting me. Yesterday evening, I received the Matrix. Yesterday night, I was shot where I stood. And yet it's been two years." He pressed a hand over his chest. "I'm not even alone in my own spark anymore. I'm not even sure of the thing that's sharing my spark. And now," he laughed, short and sharp, "my greatest immediate concern is disabusing Optimus of his notion that we're romantically involved, before he grows too certain of it!"

"It's a lot to catch up on," said Ratchet, and for a brief horrible moment experienced a pang of envy of Megatron. The two years he'd missed had been horrible for everyone.

"And you." Megatron looked at him, really looked, a sharp and searching gaze that deeply discomfited Ratchet. For a moment he missed the Megatron he'd known, the quiet, gentle-seeming mech always a little afraid of his own shadow. Being looked at like this wasn't pleasant, particularly from someone he'd mentored and grown used to following quietly in his footsteps. "You were left with Pharma. And it took them two years to rescue you."

"Let's not talk about that," said Ratchet quickly.

"No," said Megatron. "Let's. I know you don't want to. I know you don't want to make trouble. Primus, for a mech so irascible, when it's your problem, you're remarkably pacifistic. I saw your scuffs and dents. He came down to find you while I was asleep, didn't he?"

"And so what if he did?" flared Ratchet, stung beyond bearing. What right had Megatron to come back as if he'd never been gone and start *prying*? "How I deal with him is my own choice!"

"Not telling Optimus, that I can understand," said Megatron. "He wouldn't believe you, or he'd turn it into an opportunity to flagellate himself for not seeing it. But you know I have known it for a long time. It was hard to miss, even mutilated in mind as I was." His shoulders hunched, and he looked pleadingly up at Ratchet from under the brow ridge of his helm. "I abandoned you to that,

Ratchet. If you want him dissuaded, please allow me to assist. Remember that he wasn't particularly kind to any of us students."

"First Aid is here," said Ratchet quickly, and watched Megatron jolt with surprise, his optics flaring. "He's worked out that he was shadowplayed. He wants to apologize."

"I didn't realize at the time," said Megatron softly. "But now... that makes sense." He refocused on Ratchet. "Don't change the subject."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I know," said Megatron. "But it distresses me this has gone on so long. Has anyone tried to interfere?"

Ratchet felt himself hunch. He sat down hard on his recharge slab. "I think Jazz might have," he said. "When I hesitated, he was disturbingly happy to leave Pharma to the Functionists."

"Hm," said Megatron. "I see."

"You see," said Ratchet flatly.

"And what of this Starscream? Jazz dislikes him enough."

"Jazz might do well to dislike him more. That fusion cannon on Optimus's arm is his work."

"A militant?"

"We're all militants here," said Ratchet, with wry anger.

"Ambitious too, I'd guess."

"And Optimus likes him. He doesn't like Starscream as much as Starscream wishes he might, however."

"Ah. So he'll be displeased about that kiss, I take it."

"Very much so."

Megatron sighed again, more heavily. "So. I awake and find myself in a scraplet nest. Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised." He reached to put a hand on Ratchet's knee. "And I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me. I'm sorry I left you."

"Primus, kid," said Ratchet, "I think being basically dead is a sufficient excuse from *that* guilt."

"It doesn't change the situation," said Megatron. "Neither does it change what happened to you. Both were wrong—even if there was nothing else I could have done." He sighed heavily. "All I can do is do what I can to rectify things now."

"You don't need to feel responsible for it," said Ratchet. "You did what you could."

"I am Prime," said Megatron, steel in every word. "It *is* my responsibility. That's what that *means*. Every Cybertronian, on this world or off it, wherever in the universe they are, they are my responsibility unless they choose otherwise."

Ratchet stared at him, seeing past the hardness of face and voice, and sat with a heavy sigh. Desperate idealism, with an edge of uncertainty, that need to earn his place, some kind of approval

—he saw it again in Megatron, though its expression had changed.

“Kid, you don’t need to prove anything,” he said gently. “If you want to take responsibility for that, do. But don’t indulge the guilt. Shockwave didn’t choose wrong.”

“There’s nothing special about me,” snapped Megatron. “No more than anyone else. That was the *point* of my writing. And here I am with the Matrix in my chest and calling myself Prime. I refuse to believe that it’s all ordained by Primus, that this means I’m better than anyone else. That’s wrong. But if I give it up I might return to what Trepan made me into and that I could not bear.”

“Oh, kid,” started Ratchet, but Megatron wasn’t done.

“So I *will* discharge the *true* duties of a Prime,” he said. “And I’ll do it well—better than the idiots who’ve been doing it this far. Because that’s the only way I can forgive myself.”

“You are fragging well special,” snapped Ratchet. “Not because of Primus or any of that garbage, but because I’ve never seen a mech so able to crawl out of the Pit. You got to an apprenticeship through sheer vicious will with half your processor turned into so much scrap—I saw those fragging scars, your brain looked like a nebula under UV light! But you still succeeded. You put yourself on the line to save Deadlock—and then all the other people Overlord was after. Instead of simply acquiescing, you went in and offlined him, which I certainly shouldn’t approve of but *do*, because those were my friends too and I’m just glad he didn’t kill you. You received the Matrix and still defied the Functionists on their fragging doorstep! You are fragging well special—but not because of Primus or how you were made or any such garbage but because of that.” He prodded Megatron in the chestplates, over the spark. “You. Who you are. And who you’ve chosen to be in the darkest days of your life. And that will make you a good Prime.”

“It’s not that I don’t want power,” said Megatron quietly. “I do. But not because of an ancient bauble!”

“Take what you can get, stop complaining, and get to work,” said Ratchet. “Or, right now, plug in and get to sleep.”

Chapter 55

“We’re doing what we can,” said Optimus.

He was eager enough to escort Megatron around, Soundwave trailing them like a silent, deeply unnerving shadow. Megatron looked at the people around him. Many were scuffed or dented; all had some kind of healing patch job. They all looked tired but defiant.

“We have a shortage of medics,” said Optimus. “Not many left the Functionists. Why would they? They’re the least affected by all of this. The medical staff is Ratchet, Pharma, Hook, First Aid, and Ambulon.”

Megatron nodded. “I will join them. I was at least nearing the end of my apprenticeship with Ratchet; I might as well put those skills to use. This is the military arm of your rebellion, I take it.”

“Yes. Prowl’s running a refugee camp a block or so over—it’s the same old factory. Some people are simply not cut out for fighting. There’s too great a cultural difference.”

Megatron made a noncommittal noise, not liking that conclusion. “And their medical needs...?”

“They come here.”

“I see. Prowl is Jazz’s conjunx, correct?”

“He is. I take it Jazz told you.”

“Yes. And what’s the command structure?”

He had the brief satisfaction of seeing Optimus look uncomfortable at that. “Myself, Starscream, then Soundwave and Jazz. Starscream stepped up to take Jazz’s place after Soundwave refused it.”

“I see.” Megatron looked over his shoulder at Soundwave. “And why did you do that?”

Soundwave’s visor flickered. “Soundwave: more effective in third in command role, complimenting Jazz.”

Megatron gave him a curt nod. “And Starscream?”

Optimus sighed heavily. “It’s a sad story. He was an excellent Vosian scientist, but was falsely accused of academic dishonesty as an excuse to remove him from his research position and conscript him. He formed his own resistance cell within the Vosian military and later joined us. I’ve been impressed with his sincerity and skill.”

“I see.” It was a good noncommittal thing to say, because Optimus didn’t seem to read it as the discomfort it was. He didn’t like the comment about the refugees being ill-suited to combat. He liked the comment about cultural differences still less, and he took Ratchet’s opinions on Starscream very seriously indeed.

He had yet to meet Starscream.

He had a feeling that would be an experience.

“Why don’t we recruit more of the refugees to medical roles?” he asked.

“Often, they don’t like working here,” said Optimus with a heavy sigh. “No one’s given me specifics yet.”

“I’ll look into it,” said Megatron, and Optimus glanced over at him.

“Are you sure you’ll be happy in a medical role only? I’d welcome you as an advisor.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” said Megatron. “But to start with, I’ll be a medic. It’s what I know best.”

“If you insist,” said Optimus, sounding fond but confused. Megatron gave him a small, tight smile, and began to turn away, then turned back. Optimus had to be quickly disabused of the notion he was open to any sort of intimacy.

He leaned in, hoping that Soundwave would recognize it as a request for privacy, and quickly said “Optimus. I apologize. I saw Terminus—that other mech—while we were prisoners of the Functionists. I think he’s dead, but I need time.”

He felt part of himself tense as he said it, expecting anger. But Optimus merely sighed and looked sad and said, “I understand. You believe he did not survive?”

“I don’t know. It is unlikely he did.”

Optimus reached out and put a gentle hand on his shoulder, sliding his mask aside to give him a small, sad smile. “Then I’ll have people looking for him. We’ll try to find out how his story ended, at the very least. Have courage, Megatron—if you held him in such regard, I’m sure he was capable of extraordinary things, and that he might still be online.”

“Thank you,” said Megatron, but remembered Trepan. If he’d had even the slightest chance, he would have made good on his threat. He’d been too angry with both of them to do otherwise.

Megatron reported for his first day of work in the medical bay, and felt something within him unwind at the familiar sounds and smells—disinfectants and solvents and hot metal, and under it all a faint tang of energon. It was bigger and brighter than Ratchet’s clinic had been, and he thought for a moment how strange it was going to be, working in a facility with other medics than Ratchet.

He wondered how well he’d work with them, what differences there might be.

Ratchet had told him to start with the glassware (as usual) if he was occupied, so Megatron went to the washbasin and got to work. Ratchet had always been big on that, he remembered with a bit of a smile. It kept everyone humble—a simple, menial task that gave your mind time to work, and your hands experience in handling delicate things.

He needed it. Ratchet had not managed to remove his claws, and it was an adjustment. Even the familiar movements were made slightly clumsy. He frowned down at his hands. He shouldn’t be doing any surgeries soon, and the thought disappointed him.

Now that he could think clearly, now that he could be ambitious again, he could see his desires—and he wished he could be a surgeon of similar skill to Ratchet. That seemed the highest cause.

The Matrix pulsed reproach against him, something that was almost words. *That’s not what you’re needed for.*

What am I needed for?

No response, but the claws in the basin spoke for it. War. Overlord's death was likely the first of many.

He'd done right to refuse the Oath, to tell Ratchet he couldn't stay on this path, but it tugged at him, painful and enraging. He wanted to stay on it. He'd fought so hard for it. He remembered Terminus, dying alone in the depths of Messatine. He could have saved him. He could save so many of them!

That is not what you're needed for.

Frag off, he thought savagely at it. *I'm here now. I'll do this now. They always need more medics.*

You limit yourself.

You limit me! He shoved at that internal voice, useless as fighting smoke. *Did you come to me simply to control me as they did? I will throw myself and you too into a smelting pool if that's what you seek! I am Megatron of Tarn—and I am no one, and no thing's toy!*

I seek to bring you to greatness. And to be what Cybertron so desperately needs. I seek to bring the fruition of all your determination, all your plans and hopes. Your writings did show a way forward. Your writings, the world you posited, they must come to pass for us as a species.

Very well, but I will do it in the matter I see fit. You do not get to dictate what I work as.

A medic's scruples will limit you.

Too bad. He returned to washing the glassware. The Matrix quieted, with the air of a caretaker waiting for a fretful protoform to calm.

He ignored it.

“What the frag are you doing in here?”

Megatron's helm jerked up and he turned, a beaker still in his hands. His optics narrowed. He could feel his lips skin back from his dentae, showing the fangs the Matrix had given him. Pharma stood in the doorway, and the hatred that rose in Megatron was all his own.

“Working,” he said, keeping his voice gentle and quiet, which to his delight seemed to scare Pharma more.

“You have no right to be in here!” It was bluster, obviously so.

“On the contrary. I requested this as my assignment on the base, and Optimus signed off on it.”

Pharma's mouth twisted. “That's Lord Optimus to you.”

“Is it?” said Megatron. “How strange. I thought we didn't stand on ceremony here. If you insist, I'd be happy to accommodate you—I haven't made a deep study of it, but I believe no other honorific than *Prime* or *my Prime* is appropriate for me.”

Pharma sputtered. Megatron just watched him, thoughtful and amused.

“Don't you have something more important to do, *my Prime*?” he managed at last.

“I am still serving out my apprenticeship to Ratchet,” said Megatron, still unruffled, and deliberately turned his back on Pharma. There was a sputter, then the sound of angry pedes stamping away. Megatron smiled to himself, but kept a wary audial out.

If Pharma tried to take this out on Ratchet, he would shortly regret it extremely.

He didn’t, fortunately. Megatron ended up doing the routine diagnostics for many of the frontliners.

It was, perhaps, the best illustration of the problems with “cultural differences” he could have asked for.

“Your name is Sunstreaker, correct?”

“Yes.” The mech glared at him. “Why are you even in here? Everyone knows you’re Prime. Shouldn’t you be lording it over everyone?”

“This is the job I’m trained to do,” said Megatron, refusing to be ruffled.

Sunstreaker sneered. “Or an excuse to stay behind the lines. You have no idea what a war’s actually like, do you? Started nice and safe deep in a mine, kept on as a medic, still a medic. I fought in the *pits*. Don’t try to coddle me.”

“I won’t,” said Megatron, amused. “I see that you’re back in here because you have yet to meet all the medical requirements to return to active duty.” Megatron made a show of peering down at the chart. “Namely, the interface transmitted infections panel.”

“Ratchet already *tried*,” sneered Sunstreaker. “You want a taste of what he got?”

Megatron looked up at him with an expression of mild consternation. “You mean to tell me you laid hands on Chief Medical Officer Ratchet over your *interface transmitted infections* panel? How juvenile of you.”

Sunstreaker leapt for him, but the Matrix was ready. Reflexes that weren’t his kicked in; he ducked and swept Sunstreaker’s legs from under him, letting his momentum carry him around so he could tackle Sunstreaker before he got up and get a hand on his throat.

“You can stay off active duty forever if you want,” he informed Sunstreaker. “That’s not my concern, that’s yours. But as soon as you touch any medical staff here, that *is* my problem.” He flexed his claws on the frontliner’s throat to make his point. “And I’m still an apprentice. Unlike almost everyone else here, I’ve yet to take an oath not to cause harm. And I will very much cause harm if any of the staff are injured. Are we clear?”

“Yeah I guess,” said Sunstreaker, and then popped a panel to expose his energon lines. “Get it over with.”

“Gladly,” said Megatron, and did.

Sunstreaker was one of the more civil patients of the day. Sixshot was... bad. Megatron actually had a moment where he was sure he was going to lose that fight—about when the other mech had a hand on his helm and was bashing it into the floor. The thing that Sixshot hadn’t accounted for was that Megatron’s helmet was a miner’s helmet, and intended to keep his head and processor safe while enduring much worse. The really unpleasant part was the motion. He managed to reach up and jam all his claws into Sixshot’s wrist, and the next few moments were a blur of Matrix-guided violence, leading to him sitting on Sixshot and informing him that wanting to refuse treatment was

all well and good and well within his rights, but if he were to attack the medical staff in the course of said refusal, they were going to continue to have personal problems, did Sixshot understand?

Sixshot understood, strongly aided by the arm twisted up behind his back.

“Well,” said a voice from the doorway once Sixshot was gone, “Your fighting style’s improved.”

Megatron stood, using the medical berth as a support, and smiled at the person in the doorway. “I can’t take credit for it,” he said. “A good part of it is the Matrix. I could use some formal training. It’s good to see you again.” He narrowly avoided using the wrong name, managing “Deadlock,” before memory inserted *Drift* instead.

“Yes,” said Deadlock, eyeing him thoughtfully. “It’s good to see you again, Megatron.”

Megatron returned the examination with interest. Deadlock had switched his optics, gold to red, sharpened his dentae and claws, and was sporting two very large guns. There was a new hardness in his face. Drift had been plenty vicious—he’d been alive after who knew how long in the Dead End, after all. But there was something overall meaner in Deadlock’s bearing, and Megatron was torn between gladness that Deadlock was unlikely to need saving again, and concern about what might have caused it.

“Why now?” said Deadlock at last.

Megatron raised an eyebrow.

“Why return now?”

“It was when I was brought out of stasis,” said Megatron. “The shot put me in stasis for two years. Ratchet only brought me out last night.”

Deadlock continued to stare at him. There was almost an accusation in his face.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he said, as if he didn’t quite mean it, and pushed himself off the doorframe and was gone.

Chapter 56

When Megatron went to collect his morning energon, he found himself waved over to the table at which a number of the frontliners sat—including Sunstreaker and Sixshot. Bemused—and fully confident in his abilities to wipe the floor with them should that become necessary—he went.

“So,” he said, having sat, “has this anything to do with our altercations yesterday?”

“Yup,” said Sunstreaker happily. “You’re the first of the medics to have passed the test.”

“The test.”

“You know medics,” put in the red mech next to him—Sideswipe, his spark twin, Megatron remembered. “All nasal ridge in the air, holier than thou intellectuals. How they react when you don’t immediately fall at their pedes tells you a lot about them.”

“And how has Ratchet not passed the test?” asked Megatron, swirling his energon.

“Ratchet and First Aid are all well enough,” said someone to his left. “First Aid just bribes you. Ratchet’s learning to do something other than look appalled when he’s let his mouth get him into more trouble than he can get out of—Ironhide’s training him, so you can respect that.”

“Pharma, though...”

There was a chorus of disdain.

“He just screeches and calls security. Typical spoiled brat of a flyer.”

“But you—you’re not afraid to get your hands dirty,” said Sunstreaker. “Just like the rest of us.”

“Really,” said Megatron, keeping his voice cool and looking all of them over. “You do realize medics take an oath not to cause harm.”

There was a silence after this.

“How stupid,” said someone.

“Yeah. Sure, they say that, but what mech in his right mind is just going to let you hurt him without resisting?”

“Some of them take it very seriously,” said Megatron.

“Well, it’s fragging stupid.” Sixshot drained his energon. “Only some uppercaste snob could think of something that stupid. Seeya, Optimus has me on a raid.”

“And yet,” said a voice behind Megatron, and Deadlock slipped smoothly into Sixshot’s vacated spot, “it’s not something *you* take seriously.”

Megatron tapped his finger against his insignia. “I’m an apprentice. I haven’t taken the oath yet.” He frowned at Deadlock, who returned it with interest. “And to what are you referring?”

Deadlock snorted. “Haven’t any of you realized?”

Blank looks all around. Megatron kept his frown, suspicious of where this was going. Deadlock put

a hand on his shoulder, claws digging in hard enough to hurt and mar his paint. “This, here, is the mech who killed Overlord.”

There was a long pause as everyone stared at him. Megatron, shocked and angry and only just realizing that maybe this wouldn’t be catastrophic—after all, it wasn’t like anyone here was going to arrest him for that—glared back, half expecting them to laugh.

They didn’t.

They just looked at him, and Sixshot said, “You know what? I could see that,” and at the very far end of the table a mech yelled, “*I knew* you seemed familiar!”

Megatron bent forward to look and saw at the other end Astrotrain, still horribly recognizable. His plating tried to fluff out in a threat display at the same time Astrotrain said, “Hey, no hard feelings, right? Mech’s gotta make a living?”

“Right,” said Megatron slowly, his tone indicating it was nothing of the sort. “No hard feelings.”

People between the two of them scooted back.

“Er,” said Astrotrain, easily twice Megatron’s size and wilting a little. “Seriously. I’m sorry. There weren’t a lot of other choices in the Dead End. Good job killing Overlord. I think we’re all glad he’s offline.”

“Very,” said Deadlock, and then smiled at Megatron, the fangs still very much apparent but it seemed he meant it this time.

Megatron shrugged. “It needed to be done. It seemed like I was in the best position to do it.”

“Most mecha wouldn’t have thought of it that way,” said Astrotrain. “But...I’m glad you succeeded.”

“And good job sticking it to the Functionists,” someone yelled, grinning. “We were surprised enough to see a *miner* up there and then you actually told them to stick it up their afts!”

“And you lived,” said someone else, sounding cheerful as well.

Megatron looked down at his cube. Certainly, he had won. But Terminus was dead. Terminus had been the one to sacrifice everything for this, and it wasn’t right that his name would never be known by any of them.

But this was still revenge for him. There was a movement now, of people dedicated to their cause, and the Functionists might after all be defeated. That was a worthy trade, Terminus would have said, and Terminus would have been glad to die in such a cause, especially if he’d known it would be this successful.

He looked up and smiled at the rest of the table, showing his own fangs. “There’s one other name you should remember,” he said. “It is Terminus. Terminus was a dear friend who sacrificed himself so I could make that speech. Remember him. Your ferocity, your praise—he deserves them as well. He was the first sacrifice in our war. Honor that!”

They raised their cubes in response with a roar, and Megatron’s spark eased. He’d done the right thing. The guilt washed away, and he looked up and down the table of his Decepticons, and felt a true hope blossom within him.

“Well, you’re making a splash.”

This mech was big and red, though a little smaller than Megatron himself. He looked down at him while he finished washing the glassware. “I do not believe we’ve been introduced.”

“Name’s Ironhide. I’m here for your combat training. Though from what Sixshot and Sunstreaker tell me, you don’t need much.”

“It’s all instinct,” Megatron said. “While I’m glad of their praise, I don’t want to be entirely reliant on the Matrix. Give me a moment to dry off and I will join you happily.”

“Oh, you won’t be so happy about it once I’ve finished kicking you around the mat,” said Ironhide with a grin. “And Jazz’ll be joining in, so it should be entertaining at least.”

“Any opportunity to learn,” said Megatron dryly and followed him out the door.

“So you killed Overlord, huh?”

“I see rumors spread quickly.”

“Deadlock seems pretty certain of it.”

“It’s his own conjecture, though I will not dispute it.”

“How’d you do that?”

In response, Megatron slid the blade out of his arm. He’d been a little surprised to still have it; it’d been dismantled while he’d been in Functionist hands. Ratchet must have restored it.

“Huh,” said Ironhide. “Cute trick. Very illegal upon a time.”

“Indeed,” said Megatron, and retracted it. “But it did its job, and I am disinclined to dismount it now.”

“I could see why,” said Ironhide. “Don’t use it today. I’m not in the mood for some idiot newbie to spread my internals all over the room.”

“You are not confident in your ability to prevent that?” said Megatron, with patent innocence.

“Just for that...” said Ironhide, and let his tone finish his threat for him.

Megatron chuckled.

The room was already crowded. Megatron felt a jolt of unease within his tanks. He was, in fact, far from confident in his abilities, and the Matrix, while helpful, was little more than a crutch. Getting the slag beaten out of him in front of this many people—people who seemed to be generally unwilling to accept people who couldn’t defend themselves—seemed foolhardy in the extreme.

“Go take your place,” said Ironhide. Megatron did.

“On my count,” said Ironhide, setting himself opposite. Megatron felt his defensive systems online, the Matrix reaching automatically for them. He vented and let it happen, caught Impactor’s eye. Impactor gestured several times, totally incomprehensible—some kind of barfight advice, Megatron was sure.

He looked away and focused on Ironhide.

Ironhide didn't look like much of a threat, that was true. He was significantly smaller and lighter than Megatron, though that wasn't saying much; many of the mecha around them were, and Megatron was sure the same thing was true of the refugee camp. But there was likely a good reason Ironhide had charge of training people like him. He had to have experience to back this up.

Megatron let the Matrix settle him into a stance, slightly sideways to Ironhide, one foot in front of the other, knees slightly bent, arms up, and waited.

When Ironhide moved, he moved fast.

Megatron felt himself react before he knew what he was doing, arm up to block Ironhide's punch and moving in fast to grapple. But Ironhide seemed to be made of smoke, and slipped through his hands and back, darting in to strike again. Megatron locked that one but not the next; Ironhide danced around him and got in past his guard to land a stinging blow on his abdominal vents. Megatron ground his dentae, an unfamiliar anger rising in him. He tamped it down as best he could, circling and looking for an opening.

He lunged before he knew what he was lunging for and struck Ironhide in the chest. Ironhide saw it coming, seized his wrist and turned, and Megatron found himself airborne.

The mat, soft as it was, drove all the air out of him when he landed, and he lay staring up at the ceiling for a split second trying to gasp some air back into his ventilation system. "Ready to give up?" Ironhide said above him, and Megatron responded by kicking the other mech's feet out from under him.

There was a cheer that sounded like Optimus behind him. Megatron rolled to his feet to find Ironhide already up and grinning.

"You're not bad, kid," he said. "But you're cocky and you definitely don't know what you're doing."

Megatron wondered, briefly, if the other Decepticons had gone light on him during their fights in the medical bay. He didn't want to contemplate that.

Ironhide charged him. Megatron tried to imitate what Ironhide had done to him, the Matrix helping, but somehow the arm he grabbed slid from his grasp and Ironhide struck him in the middle of the back. Megatron reached back with a foot, hooked it around Ironhide's ankle, and yanked, so as he fell forward he toppled Ironhide as well. He scrambled upright, to find Ironhide back on his feet again.

He'd never considered what a pain it was to fight a smaller opponent before. He wondered if he could have used similar techniques against Overlord's thugs, or the Cuoncil Guards, and appreciated what he was learning from Ironhide even as he gritted his dentae in frustration and embarrassment.

"One more touch," said Ironhide. Megatron realized belatedly that he meant blow, and then Ironhide was on him again.

This time, he managed to block most of the attacks, felt a small flare of pride, and then found his legs kicked out from under him and Ironhide's arm on his throat. "All right," said Ironhide. "We'll call that good. You've got the basics, kid. Now just learn what to do with them."

He sat up, though still on Megatron, and shook his head. "Though how the frag you have trouble

applying them...it's like you know all of it but have no idea how to *do* it."

"It's the Matrix," said Megatron. "It's helping. Or trying to. I've never had formal training."

"Fragging meddling artifacts," said Ironhide. "All right, tell you what, I'll teach you from the ground up so you are actually being controlled by this," he poked Megatron in the helm, "and not this." He prodded Megatron's chestplates.

"I would appreciate that," said Megatron, and was interrupted by a derisive cough from the sidelines.

"Really?" said the flyer standing there. "You're trying to train him? He's even more of a civilian than your chief medic."

"Starscream," said Optimus, disapproving.

Starscream stepped forward, pacing around Megatron with an expression of false concern. Disdain radiated off him in waves. Ironhide got to his pedes, but Megatron merely propped himself up on his elbows and watched Starscream with a carefully noncommittal expression.

"Look at him," said Starscream. "Perhaps he has done some remarkable things, but you can't expect him to be everything. He's a miner stuffed in a medic's role. He won't know combat. He won't know strategy or tactics. It's lovely that the Matrix thinks we can all aspire to greatness, and I'm sure he's a very wonderful mech," his mouth twisted, "but as part of the command staff? That's foolish."

"You sound like a Functionist," said Megatron, keeping his voice quiet. "Isn't that what we're fighting?"

"There's Functionism and then there's practicality," said Starscream, and bent to offer a clawed hand. Megatron eyed it, wondering what sort of deadly surprises one could hide in a palm, and did not take it. "I don't want to lose our Prime just as he's been returned to us."

It was probably the wrong thing to do, given that Starscream was almost certainly trying to irritate him, but Megatron glared at him. "I have no interest in being coddled."

"Forgive me if I'm a little concerned," said Starscream. "I only fear you might not be so very lucky *twice*."

"Starscream," said Optimus again, sounding distressed, "it's his first sparring session. Of course he's going to have a lot to learn."

"Of course. But we're short on time, and a Prime who can't even control his connection with the Matrix..."

"Optimus is right, Starscream," said Jazz. "Ease off, huh? Bet you got your skidplates kicked all around the ring your first day. I'd be happy to help you with a reenactment."

"Jazz," said Optimus, now really disappointed.

"Sorry boss," said Jazz, and didn't sound sorry. "Just thought we shouldn't encourage taunting the new guy."

"I was only concerned," said Starscream. "But if you wish to continue building him up to have inappropriate notions of his own abilities, by all means, do so. But you won't be the one to pay the

price.” He withdrew the hand, turned and left. Muttering, most of the other mecha followed him.

Deadlock, Optimus, Jazz and a mech Megatron guessed was Prowl stayed.

“He is only worried,” said Optimus, slowly, and gave Megatron a look of similar concern. “And Megatron, you *are* a medic. I know from Ratchet how very uneasy you tend to be about war, and the Matrix cannot make it easier. Please, don’t let us push you into a role you cannot easily fill.”

“Have no concern about that,” said Megatron, and was glad he managed to keep his voice civil.

Optimus sighed, heavily. “I’ll speak to Starscream. While it’s understandable, he could have handled that better.”

“Do that,” said Jazz, very near a growl. “And one of these days? Stop making excuses for him, Optimus. He doesn’t deserve them, and he’s not sorry.”

“That’s enough of that,” said Optimus, and was gone.

Megatron climbed to his pedes again, glared at the door. “Regardless of what either of them says, I do want combat training,” he said. “I’m not staying behind the lines. That’s not what I’m here for.” He looked around at all of them. “So. Tell me. What must I do to improve?”

“It is strange watching you fight,” said Deadlock, pacing toward them, his arms folded. “It’s like you’re a puppet. You need to stop letting it do that.”

Jazz and Ironhide nodded their agreement.

Deadlock looked at all of them, then at Megatron. “I think he was better before he got the Matrix. He was all right when he was dealing with Sunstreaker and Sixshot, but those were brief and they were being easy on him—it was only a test. But it showed. I’m going to help.”

Jazz and Ironhide shared a look. “You sure about that?”

“Of course,” said Deadlock, now looking at Megatron. “We’re friends.”

Megatron had the not entirely unpleasant suspicion that Deadlock’s idea of friendship was probably going to include a lot of beating the slag out of him. He didn’t entirely mind.

“Besides, making you look good is going to embarrass that slagger Starscream no end,” said Deadlock. “And I’d pay good money to see that smug smile go away even for a few *seconds*.”

“Don’t feel like you’re the only one,” muttered Jazz. “All right. Let’s get to work.”

Chapter 57

“Get up!” Someone shook his shoulder hard, hands tight enough to be almost painful. Megatron’s optics online, the urgency in Ratchet’s voice bringing him conscious faster than the hand on his shoulder. Ratchet stood over him, mouth a grim line.

“Energon raid went wrong,” he said. “Casualties incoming. They’re twenty minutes out at most.”

Megatron sat up, running a hand over his face. “How many?”

“Original force was thirty mecha,” said Ratchet. “We’ll see how many of them return.”

“Understood.” He followed Ratchet out into the organized frantic activity of the base. As this part had been an old warehouse, it was several levels of rooms around a large central atrium. There was a triage center being constructed in that atrium now, First Aid directing activities with a loud, calm voice heavily laden with praise.

“I see Pharma hasn’t arrived yet,” muttered Ratchet. “Come on.”

Megatron followed. It was hard to imagine what this place would look like in less than an hour, but the Matrix and his imagination conspired to paint the room in energon and oil. He refused to flinch at the image, following Ratchet down the stairs and into the room.

“Oh it’s good to see you,” said First Aid when Ratchet appeared, optics flaring with relief. “Please take over, do, you have better experience.”

Ratchet patted his shoulder with a small smile. “Not like this, Aid. You did a good job.”

Megatron found himself smiling as well at the praise, and glanced at First Aid. Nervousness which had nothing to do with the incoming disaster twisted in the pit of his tanks, and he fought the urge to look away as First Aid focused on him, remembering the spark-deep pain of First Aid’s initial rejection.

“Hi,” said First Aid, with a little wave. “I...think we’ve got a lot to talk about.” He looked up at Megatron, pedes shuffling, and Megatron read a mirror of his own nervousness in the little bot’s frame. “But um. For now, I’m just going to say I’m really, really sorry for what happened. I think I was shadowplayed, but that’s no excuse for the harm caused.”

Megatron snorted. “That’s every excuse,” he said. “Believe me. I know from experience.” He held out a hand to First Aid, who happily clasped it and then yanked him in for a hug.

“We have *so* much to catch up on!” he said. “Once this is—”

“Catch up *later!*” roared Ratchet from the other side of the room. “Go make sure the patches are sorted and find me another fragging number 2 plating saw, this one’s *broken!*”

First Aid and Megatron shared a look. First Aid laughed. “Same old Ratchet.”

They went to work. Pharma arrived, staying obviously to the opposite side of the room as Ratchet and Megatron, which Megatron appreciated. The twenty minute mark, when the survivors should have arrived, came and went. They ran out of things to do. Ratchet had been folding the same thermal insulator for the last five minutes, shaking it out with a grumble and starting over again. First Aid hopped up on a table and kicked his pedes, staring at the door. Megatron found himself

going in circles, shifting something here or there a few millimeters to one side or another, and staring at the doors.

Fifteen minutes after the estimated arrival time, a small green bot with a facial insignia showed up, clutching a clipboard.

“You’ll need to be prepared for more than thirty casualties,” he said to Pharma and Ratchet. “We got more information. The reason the raid went wrong was they encountered an attack on one of the rescue parties on the way back. They, and the rescuers and their transport, got pinned down outside of the city. Optimus and the frontliners have gone to extract them, but field reports indicate heavy casualties.”

“We really need some field medics,” muttered Ratchet. “What’s the new ETA?”

“They’re evacuating some of them now. I haven’t gotten a report from that recently enough I can give you a position with any accuracy. I do, however, have some civilians interested in assisting.” He stepped aside, and gestured to the handful of mecha behind him. “I hope the extra hands will be of use.”

“Thank you,” said Ratchet. “Sounds like we have some time at least to get them ready.”

“I’ll start on them,” said Pharma. Megatron blinked with surprise. He’d never seen Pharma working in a professional capacity, and the change from the sneering, preening slaghead he knew and loathed was immense.

Megatron looked around at the medical bay, and at the people waiting, and thought of the hell of transporting the wounded back and felt sick. “You,” he said to the small green mech. “Can you find me a transport, armored, and a driver? A good one.”

It took Ratchet a moment to realize what he meant. “Oh frag no you don’t.”

“I can,” said the mech. “Why?”

“Medical care in transport will raise survival rates,” said Megatron. “I’m heavily armored, and I am trained to stabilize until more experienced practitioners can reach the patient.” He tipped a grim smile at Ratchet. “I’m a good choice for medical evacuations. Get me a transport and a driver.”

“Someone hasn’t gotten the memo that he isn’t *disposable*,” snarled Ratchet. “Forget that, Minimus, he’s staying *here*.”

“You asked for a field medic, you’re getting one,” said Megatron. “My training may not be complete, but I’ve got more than any other of those poor fraggers. Minimus. Transport and driver.”

Minimus frowned at him.

Megatron stared back at him.

“You know he’s right, Ratchet,” said Pharma. Megatron, startled, turned to look at him with narrowed optics. “If things are as bad as they sound, we’re going to lose half of them before they get here.”

Ratchet looked back and forth between them. “Fine. I’m going too.”

“No you don’t!” chorused everyone, including First Aid, and Megatron was startled to see genuine horror on Pharma’s face.

That settled it. He put a hand on Ratchet's shoulder, containing himself. "Very well," he said, forcing his plating to settle again. "We need to get moving. I'll take care of him. Minimus, have the transport ready. First Aid, get some emergency kits together."

Ratchet was hoping the force of his stare could actually melt plating. Megatron was an idiot. Megatron did not seem to care he was being an idiot, and leveling the force of his disapproval at Megatron wasn't having its usual effect. The mech sat across from him, looking thoughtful and grave, and *not noticing*.

After a while, Megatron said aloud, "I'm glad to have your company, Ratchet, but I don't like the idea of leaving everyone in Pharma's hands if something happened to you."

"You're calling *me* foolhardy?" said Ratchet. "You've been out of a fragging CR tank for less than three days, and you're plunging off into a war zone with what, a medical kit and an iron belief in your own immortality? I didn't glue you back together to watch your foolish aft get blown out of atmosphere. Have you ever even seen the effects of artillery fire?"

Megatron looked steadily back at him. "What we did in the Dead End wasn't safe, but it was necessary. In my view, this is much the same. We'll save lives this way, Ratchet, and I *know* you reinforced my armor when you finished my repairs. With that, and the Matrix and its modifications, I mass substantially more than I did before I received it, and most of that is armor and defensive systems. No other medic has my build. No other medic can take the damage I can. It's not a belief in my own immortality. It's a job that needs to be done, and I am best suited to do it. You..." He smiled a little, amused, and Ratchet's glare intensified, "have substantially more experience, but should a stray shot find you, you will be in for a far more unpleasant time than I."

"That didn't protect you from the Functionists." Ratchet heard the bitterness, the pain in his own voice, and refused to be apologetic. Megatron's startled expression was satisfying in the extreme.

Then he let out a long ventilation and his shoulders slumped. He lowered his helm and looked at his pedes, as if ashamed. After a moment, he lifted his helm a little to look up at Ratchet again under his browridge, guilt and sadness plain on his face.

"I won't abandon you again, Ratchet," he said, and something about the way he said it made it sound like an immutable fact of the universe. For a moment, Ratchet wanted to take it in simple faith, but he'd never been one for simple faith. He sighed heavily.

"You can't control that," he said. "You shouldn't promise that."

Megatron gave him a small crooked smile, still tinged with sadness. "You'll be surprised."

The transport went over a bump. Megatron straightened, shoulders squaring. "If you have any further sage advice before the two of us plunge into a war zone, now's the time."

Ratchet watched him with an uncomfortable mix of pride, and familiar terror. He thought of the impact of that bullet and the long terrible fall, the shards of the datapad glittering, the light of optics and spark alike flaring and flickering and fading dark, he thought of the thousand other terrible ways death could still take the young mech across from him, and then he closed his eyes and shook his helm, and told him what he could. Whatever he could, in the likely vain hope that it could keep the young fool alive.

It was far quieter than he expected.

Megatron straightened up and looked around the darkened buildings. They couldn't risk damage to the transport, so they'd agreed that it would wait for them on the outskirts of the fighting, in the cover of the city. The Functionists hadn't gotten close enough to start shelling that, by the reports, and Starscream and the rest of his airforce were keeping them busy in the skies above.

The windows around them were dark. Here and there, one glowed very faintly, where the inhabitants had used thin material to block the light. It was silent, no one on the street.

With good reason, thought Megatron. It would take an insane mech to be out now, not without a purpose.

He transformed, glad of his armored alt mode. Next to him, Ratchet did the same, and Megatron wished he had some way of transporting the other mech. Ratchet's ambulance alt seemed very small and delicate next to him.

He'd spent a long time without transforming, he realized. He'd been ashamed enough of the tank treads on his back, of the fear they almost instantly produced among his colleagues and patients. They said too big, brutish, aggressive. All the things he fought desperately not to be. But it felt good, now. Dirt and rubble under his treads, the heaviness of his armor around him a comfort, the sky above him. This felt right, down to the nervous, anticipatory buzz through his lines. He wished he had some sort of built-in weapon, like the other tanks he'd seen among the Decepticons. But he'd originally been designed to haul heavy loads and survive cave-ins, not to fight.

That will have to change, he thought, and rolled carefully forward. "I'll go first," he told Ratchet, and hoped the other mech wouldn't argue.

Darkness and silence for what seemed like a long time. Every sensor in his neural net prickled. Darkness and silence, until light flared and a thump more felt than heard blew dust and debris into their plating.

"Stray shot," said Ratchet, not sounding his usual sure self. "We're getting closer."

A few moments brought them to the edge of the city. Megatron transformed, keeping himself in the shelter of a building. Ratchet transformed next to him, looking up at him with concerned optics. "Are you sure about this, kid? No one would blame you if..."

"I'm sure," Megatron said, and despite the prickle of alert tension running through his lines and over his plating, he meant it. He felt awake, maybe on edge, but there was no fear. An immense certainty, as if something within him had woken up and said, *this is what you do now*. "Stay behind me, Ratchet." He bent a firm regard on the other mech. "I mean it. Both of us know I'm more heavily armored, and we can't risk losing you." Ratchet looked as if he were about to protest, and Megatron put a firm hand on his shoulder to forestall it. "Ratchet," he said, firm, "If all goes wrong, you *can* give the Matrix to another mech. But replacing someone of your experience and skill in our medical team *will* be impossible. *Stay behind me.*"

He heard the Matrix in his voice in the last sentence, and wasn't sure whether or not to be disturbed by its agreement with him. He was right, but he wasn't sure he liked it agreeing with him that he was disposable.

They found the first mech around the corner. It was easier with him unconscious; Megatron could

look down into the mech's abdominal cavity and think of him as a hologram. This was... more than the injuries he'd seen in the Dead End. Those were brutal beatings and efficient murders. These were caused by things meant to kill as many as possible, destroy as much as possible, distant and terrible. He wasn't used to treating people who were simply missing parts, melted and vaporized and *gone*.

It didn't seem entirely real.

But there was no doubt in his mind that he'd rather be here than waiting in a clean, clear facility and not knowing how many would fall never to be found. He and Ratchet worked shoulder to shoulder, for where there was one downed mech there were often others, victims of the same blasts. The thud of displaced air, the flare of weapons fire, became little more than background noise, distant enough not to be dangerous. The fighting had moved on.

They loaded the mecha who could be stabilized onto Megatron's alt and into Ratchet's, and Megatron drove slow and careful back to the transport and waited to be unloaded.

They caught up with the fighting slowly, the transport carefully trailing them. It would have been better to have it closer; the trips to and fro slowed them, but they agreed it was all too likely that Functionists would aim for it if they saw it.

They were still picking up the mecha left for dead by their companions, people who were probably not going to make it, but who they could still stabilize. It was probably a mistake; it was probably wasted time, but neither of them could bear to leave them behind. Then they caught up with the actual combat.

Megatron scooped up an energy shield from the motionless hands of one dead Decepticon, mounted it on his arm and activated it. He was glad of it a moment later, raising his arm on instinct as something flew toward him, and the shield flared bright as it absorbed the shot that would have melted plating and lost him the arm at the least. "I think we're getting closer," he said to Ratchet, who responded with an unamused grunt.

Now there were screams and people running and falling, and other people trying to evacuate wounded, inexperienced hands clutching at broken plating and *pulling* and mecha mangling their fallen comrades still worse as they tried to save them. Quickly, Megatron found himself separated from Ratchet; still more quickly he found himself deluged in work and calling instructions, batting hands away from already injured mecha, pinching lines closed so they wouldn't leak out, rerouting power so they wouldn't catch their own energon, closing spark chambers. His hands flew; it was some time before he realized he'd been operating and the soft rubber protectors Ratchet had helped him fit over the razor edges of his claws had long since been lost and yet he wasn't savaging his patients. He switched his shield to his back at some point, so he could use both hands and hunch over his patient to protect them.

There were other people, and that was worse and better, because angry frontliners didn't want a medic interfering, but it meant hands to transport people, and they weren't making the long trips back and forth. At one point, he ran out of patch material and began using whatever lay around, even pulling strips of plating off a corpse to patch someone's sparkchamber. It would do. It would have to be replaced but it would do. One thing after another, one procedure after another, and he hardly noticed the battle around him.

There was Ratchet ahead of him, and he hurried to join him, slinging the shield down off his back and raising it to protect the other medic from a shot. And another and another, some enemy having found them. He made as much a shelter as he could, deflecting energy bursts that would have killed Ratchet, more lightly armored as he was, and then they went their separate ways, the

Functionist gunner focusing on the shield burning blue on his arm, his back.

More mecha to patch together, more orders. His back hurt now, too long hunching, too long moving crouched. There was one he remembered, one he saw the light fading from even as he approached, and he reached anyway for the mech to try and stabilize the spark, only to have him offline in front of him. There was no time for frustration. Only movement.

Another, small and red and gold, a speedster missing a leg and a chunk of chest and shoulder. His risk was leaking out. Megatron took a few moments to patch those lines as the mech said, “Wooow, you’re pretty,” in a wondering tone and promptly fell offline from energon loss. He was stable, though, that was enough, and someone took him off Megatron’s hands and dragged him to the transports.

A familiar face this time. Sideswipe, half his fuel tank exposed and energon running bright down his faceplates, one optic burnt and sparking and his chest wide open. “Fragging save him!” Sunstreaker’s voice to his side. Megatron didn’t even nod, only continued working, patch, patch, weld, offline electrical systems and by a stroke of mercy the sensors with them. “Take him to the transports,” he said, and moved on, back still roaring protest.

He stopped looking at faces. It was work, as hard as anything in the mines. Back to Ratchet again. Reflexively, he slung the shield off his back and raised it to protect again, and realized he was only holding the skeleton of the thing. No wonder his back hurt. But no one shot at them this time. Onward, Ratchet by his side now, and the work went faster.

And then there was a blue servo in front of his face, a hand up. The patient was stabilized, so he took it, and let Optimus pull him upright. He felt himself stagger, realizing his tank was pinging him with low fuel warnings.

“We’ll get you on the last transport,” said Optimus, and his optics were tilted in such a way that Megatron knew he was smiling. “You did well, Megatron. You saved a lot of people today.”

Megatron managed a nod. It seemed like a silly expenditure of energy, but it would keep Optimus from fretting. He reset his optics several times, bringing them out of close focus and into standard, and looked around. No more wounded that he could see, debris and grayed out frames only, and Jazz was leading Ratchet away. With a sigh, he followed them, the movement of his pedes now a monumental effort.

He heard Optimus gasp as he passed him. “Megatron, your back!”

Megatron reset his optics yet again, and realized that yes, his back hurt, and the way it hurt was not how it should after a day of hard labor, but a hot urgent pain like the plating had been flayed. A check of his systems found nothing urgent, no major energon line ruptures, so he turned and gave Optimus a smile that made the other mech recoil. “It will heal,” he said, and then made his exhausted way to the transport and sat hard on the floor at Ratchet’s pedes, Optimus’s horror fading into unimportance next to his sudden, overwhelming exhaustion.

Ratchet put a jelled tube of emergency medical energon into his servo, the sort that tasted of cheap petroleum, and he ripped it open with his dentae—at least those stupid fangs were useful for something—and sucked at it as Ratchet did whatever was necessary to his back, the pain only a fleeting distraction from how fragging tired he was.

Chapter 58

Megatron woke from the most refreshing ten minute nap of his function as the transport pulled into the base, and allowed himself to be handed out, ignoring the gasps that greeted his back. He helped Ratchet down too, and then turned to help with unloading the rest of the patients, mostly ambulatory. They ushered them into the base, into the orderly activity of the triage center.

It all seemed very clear and bright to Megatron, who stood there blinking in amazement for a few moments.

“Primus, your *back*,” said First Aid behind him.

“It’s fine,” he said. “What can I do?”

“Monitor the patients that just came out of surgery,” said First Aid. “Pharma’s in there now. I think Ratchet just scrubbed in but they both say you ought to be too fragging tired to be allowed near a scalpel right now.”

Megatron’s optics narrowed at Pharma’s name, and First Aid put a hand on his shoulder. “He won’t try anything,” he said. “They’re working on separate patients. And Pharma’s got his professional pride if nothing else. I’m going to go join Ratchet. Spark failure equipment’s on that cart, emergency energon supplies here. That’s the most comfortable chair and here’s some midgrade.” He patted Megatron, carefully, on the arm. “Don’t worry about us. You and Ratchet mean we’ve been having a pretty pleasant time of it.”

Megatron shook his helm at that, highly doubting it, then settled down on one of the chairs. Not the most comfortable one. He didn’t want to risk falling into recharge. He knew First Aid had given him the easiest possible job on purpose, and was deeply suspicious that he was in better shape than Ratchet, but arguing wasn’t likely to change anyone’s mind. He was the most junior of the medical staff, and he’d just come off the battlefield; of course they weren’t about to trust him in surgery.

And this, too, needed doing.

“He was glorious,” said Optimus in wondering tones, and Starscream wanted to purge.

“He *was* injured,” he said aloud, layering his voice with concern. “And... forgive me for saying it, especially in the face of all he did... but he did display a worrying lack of regard for his own life. We don’t want to lose him and with his experience and his eagerness to do whatever needs to be done... I very much fear we will.”

Optimus sighed heavily. “You’re right, Starscream, as always. But his sheer courage—how much he *cares*—it’s an example to us all.”

It’s idiotic pandering, thought Starscream. You really think anyone does something like that out of altruism, even a Prime? No. He knows we’re playing a political game, and he’s getting support. In the most incredibly foolish and risky way possible, led entirely by a desire for vainglory and violence, but effectively. Especially given most of the rest of our army’s love of violence and vainglory.

Outwardly, he sighed. “I *am* impressed. And he did save lives. But he needs training, and people to make sure he doesn’t get slagged out there.”

“You’re right,” said Optimus, which was at least nice to hear. “We have to keep him safe.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” said Starscream.

It was the next morning before Megatron got a good look at what exactly had happened to his back. He’d had to recharge on his front, as putting any pressure on his abused sensors and armor resulted in an agony out of all proportion with the actual injury. Ratchet had been something between amused and sympathetic.

“Let this be a lesson to you about situational awareness,” he said, and then added, “and the fact that you cannot, in fact, take anything they throw at you.”

Then he led Megatron to one of the mirrors in the medical bay, cracked as it was, and let him have a good look at the punishment his back had taken. Megatron looked over his shoulder, ineffectively, and then in the handheld mirror Ratchet gave him, and let out a low hum of surprise.

His back was pitted and dimpled, still blackened in places. It looked like the surface of an asteroid, his paint making white swirls where heat had melted it into the underlying metal.

“That probably doesn’t hurt nearly as much as you deserve to have it hurt,” Ratchet told him. “But reinforcing your armor paid off. I think we’ve got at least three people in here on spark support who got hit with the same stuff.”

Megatron handed the mirror back. “I thought I was using a shield,” he said. “I suppose it ran out of power and I didn’t notice in time.”

“You didn’t notice in time,” said Ratchet, and gave him a flat stare. Then he huffed a sigh and put a hand on Megatron’s shoulder—carefully, in an unmelted patch. “You did good, kid. I’m proud of you. Just...” His mouth tilted wryly, “try not to get quite as slagged next time, huh?”

“I’ll try,” said Megatron. “How long until you think this’ll be healed?”

“I can strip the outer layers of the plating and replace them,” said Ratchet, “but you’re way at the bottom of the list. We’ve got a lot of much more major repairs to do first, and doing yours will be time consuming and painful. I think you can offline about fifty percent of the sensors in there. Do that, and come scrub in with me.” He gave Megatron a small, genuine smile. “I’ve missed this.”

Megatron returned the smile. “So did I.”

Ratchet wasn’t the only person impressed with his work. Pharma cornered him between surgeries, and said, “Your welding work was excellent. I haven’t lost any of your patients. Well done. You have things to learn about electrical repairs, though. Stand in on one of my surgeries; I’ll teach you.”

He left shortly after that, with Megatron staring after him in a mix of anger and confusion.

“Do it,” Ratchet told him, when he mentioned it. “It’s one of Pharma’s specialties, and you need to learn from more people than just me.”

“Even Pharma?” said Megatron, carefully. He felt like he was betraying Ratchet by even considering it. He’d seen those dents.

“Even if you don’t intend to take the Oath, you’ve got a gift for this,” said Ratchet. “I want you to be a good medic, Megatron. One of the best. Even...” His gaze dropped to Megatron’s hands, and he paused. “...even with the claws,” he finished, having obviously changed what he was going to say. “And to make the best of your abilities, you need to learn from others. Pharma is an excellent surgeon.”

“I don’t...” said Megatron, and Ratchet glared at him.

“Go take him up on the offer,” he snapped. “I’ll take Aid. Primus knows, the poor mech’s put up with Pharma long enough for one day.”

It was a very quiet, professional surgery. Pharma was too busy working to be his usual self, and to his distaste, Megatron found himself, indeed, learning new things. He didn’t like that. He wanted Ratchet to be infallible, and for Pharma to be an unbearable fragger with incompetence to match. And he wasn’t.

Ratchet was right.

He did need to learn from other people, and those people were in short supply. It was Pharma or no one and he was both horrified and impressed that Ratchet was willing to allow Pharma a role in his training. Ratchet was too forgiving.

Other people weren’t.

Deadlock sat down next to him and gave him a glare that should have stripped paint. “You’re working with Pharma now?”

“Ratchet’s idea,” said Megatron, and didn’t hide the unhappiness in his voice. “Says I need more experience.”

“What the frag for? You did a good enough job patching up Roddy.” Deadlock jerked his helm toward the end of the table, where a small, brightly painted speedster sat, laughing uproariously at something his companions had said. Megatron looked, blinked, and then rose.

“He’s not supposed to be out of the medical bay!” he said by way of explanation, which started Deadlock laughing, harder still when he reached said speedster and scooped him bodily into an emergency carry, which he instantly regretted as a flailing pede caught him across the sore back.

“You have another week of rest,” he informed the mech. “Back to the medical bay with you. How many times did you have to sit down on your way there?”

“Six!” the mech declared. “And that’s two less than this morning.”

“Oh good, you caught Hot Rod,” said Ratchet when Megatron arrived at the medical bay, the still-complaining Hot Rod over his shoulders. Megatron rolled his optics.

“Hot Rod needs to learn some self-preservation,” he said.

“That doesn’t sound like fun,” Hot Rod protested, as Megatron plopped him onto a berth. He gave them a double thumbs up. “Thanks, handsome.”

“Is this a normal thing with him?” asked Megatron.

“Very,” Hot Rod and Ratchet assured him in chorus. Hot Rod immediately turned his attention back to Ratchet. “So when can I get back to work, doc? Rescues don’t run themselves. And that last one…” he whistled low, “I wasn’t expecting them to actually fire on us like that,” he said. Don’t get me wrong, the Functionists are utter scum, but firing on civilian transports is low, even for them.”

“That’s because they don’t see you as civilians,” said Megatron quietly. Hot Rod looked up at him, surprised.

“The moment you step away from their plan—however unintentionally you do it—is the moment they decide you’re an enemy,” Megatron said. “It could be writing documents critical of them. It could be desiring a different alt mode. It could be riding on a transport when you have a wheeled alt. It could be one of a thousand things. And as soon as you step over that line, no matter how unintentionally, how *innocently* you do it, they will kill you. You are their enemy. Worse, you are the enemy of everything that keeps them on their pedestal. And that is all that matters to them.”

Hot Rod gaped up at him, then looked to Ratchet. “Wow,” he said. “I…guess I’d better read his writing, huh?”

Ratchet shrugged. “I suppose.” His optics met Megatron’s, something both proud and sad in them.

“Two more days,” said Ratchet at last, and turned away.

Megatron waited until Ratchet was out of easy hearing before he asked, “Would it be possible for me to join you on your next rescue?”

Roddy tilted his head back with a grin. “Oh frag yes.”

Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hi Megs!”

Megatron didn’t startle. Megatron wasn’t the sort of mech to startle, and he was pleased with that, but Jazz dropping out of the ceiling to hang upside down in front of him with an immense slag-eating grin might have been an exception if he were inclined to make exceptions. A quick glance upward showed that Jazz was hanging from a support beam by his knees.

“I think Optimus needs to give you more to keep you occupied,” he said after a moment. “You obviously have far too much time on your hands.”

“Neither of you are any fun,” said Jazz, without malice. “Anyway my mech, you’ve got your first staff meeting today. I am *extremely* unofficially here right now to get you prepped for that because let me tell you, Starscream’s absolutely livid about you and is definitely plotting a way or three to make you look like the stupidest fragger who ever walked this planet. And none of us want that.”

“I certainly don’t want that,” Megatron agreed, eyeing Jazz with great suspicion. The mech swung by his knees a few times until he gained the momentum to flip off the beam, landing next to Megatron with a far quieter thump than he should have. “Why have *you* decided you don’t want that?”

“Well,” said Jazz, and took Megatron by the arm. Megatron quickly shook him off with a frown. “Sorry,” Jazz said. “I’ll keep that in mind, you don’t like to be touched.”

“Thank you,” said Megatron, and kept frowning.

“You see,” said Jazz, strolling away from the main thoroughfares, “Prowler—that’s Prowl, to you—and I are of the opinion that Starscream’s gotten too big for his plating and wants to be running the place. Which we wouldn’t really object to, but he’s an afthead. He’s got an idea of what the cause should be, and it’s basically a militaristic dictatorship with him or Optimus at the front. Probably Optimus as his puppet, and him as the real power—when it comes to politics, he’s good at making sure he’s not shot at. Optimus thinks he’s wonderful, this poor, poor scientist denied his calling. But Prowler and me? We think that you can go through all sorts of hell and still be a total untrustworthy aft.”

They turned a corner and headed into the depths of the factory once more, keeping to the higher walkways. It was well above where Megatron had woken, but he still felt an uneasy prickle.

More so as he recognized the smelting pits far below.

“Used to be a recycling plant,” said Jazz. “Take what’s useful. Push the rest in there.”

Memory rose. Megatron closed his optics against it, but it sharpened it still further. *Your friend’s got options, they told him, as Terminus lay unconscious. He’ll have to make the decision, of course, but we’re counting on you to advise him. He can either opt to go to the recycling center now, where they’ll make sure he’s comfortable before they help him offline, or he can try and hang on here. But we can’t repair him. Too expensive, no return on investment. He’s old, Megaton—the mispronunciation of his name one more degradation—he wouldn’t have long in any case. If you’re a good friend, and we’re sure you are, you’ll encourage him to make a clean end of it.*

“Did they bother to offline them?” he asked before he thought better of it, and Jazz glanced at him with surprise.

“Knew someone, did you? I don’t know. I’d hope they would.” Jazz paused, huffed a sigh. “But after helping Roddy out a few times? After seeing the refugee camp? I don’t put anything past them. And I suspect a lot of what we’re seeing isn’t it getting worse, it’s stuff getting uncovered.”

Megatron stared down at the smelting pit, and wondered if it would have been a better fate than whatever he’d left Terminus to. He tore his optics away and forced himself to keep following Jazz.

“Starscream is an untrustworthy aft,” said Jazz. “And personally, I think he’s the sort who isn’t much about making sure everyone at the table has enough to fuel on—he just wants to reorganize the seating chart, so he and his buddies get the scraplet’s share. He’s got legitimacy, too. He brought us an army. But when it comes to the civilians, the people without power? He doesn’t give a frag.”

“Optimus mentioned cultural differences.”

“Yup, and they’re more than that. It’s an energon cube here, and we’re sitting on it with a lit flare. Your run ins with the frontliners probably gave you a taste of that. Imagine what it’s like if you’re say, a courier class minibot. Some of those mecha would use you as a lob ball. Hence, the refugee camp.”

He paused by a door, let it scan him.

“For all us misfits,” he said. “Your tired, your poor, your huddled masses—you already saw some pretty nasty stuff, Megatron, and you handled it well. But this is the worst part. Not because of the shape they’re in—First Aid and Ratchet’ve been seeing to that, at least, but because no one wants them. They tried to get away from the Functionsts, who’ll kill them for it, and they came here, and they weren’t useful to Starscream or Soundwave or even Optimus, no matter the nice noises he makes about unity, and here they are. Waiting.”

He pushed open the door and held it for Megatron, who stepped inside.

He was on a catwalk over a large room, which had been carefully divided into living quarters with tarps strung between poles. It was neat and tidy, aglow with friendly lights, and a thread of laughter carried to him. Something within him began to unwind, and then, as he looked more closely, tensed again.

There were small knots and gatherings, and these were joking; there were no vicious overhead lights; the plating of the mecha below was mostly bright and healthy. But there were many people just sitting around, as if waiting. Some did small tasks, some played games. But they were waiting, and there was no purpose to it. He could see, from here, a flare of optics a little too bright, a sign of stress.

“These are your people, too,” said Jazz behind him. “Will you stand for the useless as well as the useful?”

Megatron looked down at the refugee camp and felt his plating crawl, because for all the effort its inhabitants had put forth to make it look like home, to make it tolerable, it was limbo. A place of hopeless waiting.

It was better than dying. For mecha like this, it was probably better than fighting. But it wasn’t a life. And they deserved better. These were the people Starscream didn’t want. These were people

that Optimus didn't know what to do with.

“Yes,” he said at last, though there'd never been a question. He wouldn't have been himself if he'd said otherwise. “Yes. I will.”

Optimus watched Megatron enter the room, and wished his spark wouldn't turn over itself with longing. Megatron was still in mourning, he reminded himself. Optimus would do him little good panting over him like a turbofox in heat.

Never mind that he wanted to. That one night with Megatron had been *addictive*, and even though Megatron seemed much better now, Optimus could see the lines of pain and care on his face, and longed to soothe them.

He needs a friend, he told himself, and stepped forward. “Welcome,” he said aloud. “And thank you—Ratchet tells me that you're still recovering from your injuries.”

Megatron chuckled, not unkindly. “They're healing, and they were minor,” he said. “But your concern is touching.” He shuffled the stack of datapads he carried, and eyed the table. “Where should I stand?” he asked. “I think technically I'm the medical staff representative...”

“I want you here,” said Optimus, and gestured to his right side. “You're our Prime, Megatron.” He smiled behind his facemask; Megatron recognized it in his optics and smiled back, something still a little strained and tired.

Optimus put a hand on his shoulder, hoping to quell the concern he saw there. “I'm glad to have you here,” he said. “And what you've done has been incredible. I value your input.”

Megatron flinched a little under his hand; he removed it.

“Thank you,” said Megatron. “But please remember that I'm the most junior of the medical staff. If praises must be sung, sing them for Ratchet, not me.”

“We'll keep that in mind,” said Starscream. He looked at Megatron's place, then quickly moved to Optimus's immediate left, displacing Soundwave. Optimus frowned. He didn't think Megatron being here justified the snub to Soundwave. Starscream couldn't have been surprised by it. Megatron had founded their movement.

He'd have to talk with Starscream, afterward.

He composed himself, and began the meeting. Megatron remained thoughtfully silent until they began to discuss resources and the refugee camp.

“It's a drain,” snapped Starscream. “We can't just treat them like a load of fresh protoforms. They need to do *something*.”

“I agree,” said Megatron softly. Jazz's head whipped around, a frown forming under his visor, and Megatron looked up. “I've yet to meet these people,” he said. “I'm not sure of their skills. But there's a lot we're lacking—we're dependent on raids for basic goods and we're lacking necessary services. I think the mecha there might well have skills and abilities we need. The ones who don't can easily be trained—medics, runners, mechanics, and so on. I'm sure many will find it better than sitting around, and it will ease the tensions. This is dependent on their interest in cooperating—,” he paused and favored everyone with a very stern look indeed, “and I won't hear of anyone being

pushed into things, do you understand me? But they're not useless. They're not warriors—which I realize is the focus of this august body's current attentions—but they *can* make us stronger if they're yet willing to do so."

"I like the idea," said Optimus at the same time Starscream said, "It will *never* work."

Optimus sighed heavily. "Go gauge interest," he told Megatron. "Let me know. If they are interested, that will be to the good."

Megatron's shoulders were still squared, and he was still frowning. "It will require concessions from the troops," he said. "For one thing. We cannot continue to allow the division between active warriors and support mecha. I've heard tell of frontliners testing the medics; I've heard the insults flung at people who aren't on the field. This behavior cannot be tolerated if we're increasing the civilian presence. Especially since I've heard that some mecha have *laid hands on our medical staff for the performance of their duties*." This with a hard glare indeed at all of them. "I understand the tensions. But we cannot allow this. The civilians are not useless. They are not disposable. And they will not help us if they're treated badly."

"Yes well, I suppose the soft spark is part of your job description," said Starscream, and Megatron's lips actually lifted away from his dentae at that.

"And being a glory hound and an idiot is in yours?" he demanded.

Starscream bristled. Optimus stepped hastily between them. "Noted," he said to Megatron, and then to the rest of the room, "Moving on to our supply lines..."

He stopped Megatron afterward with a hand on his shoulder, noting that little flinch again. "I apologize. I think your plan is a good one, and I will support it to the best of my abilities."

"Thank you," said Megatron, his optics lifting to search Optimus's face. "Because we can't just shunt aside half our population as useless. We do this together or not at all."

It made Optimus smile. "Yes. We do this together, or not at all." He patted the shoulder under his hand. "You did well," he said. "Even with Starscream picking at you. And... please let me know if you need anything."

"I will," said Megatron. "Now, excuse me. I have work to get back to."

Megatron worked all day, and past the end of his shift, and then returned after his evening energon to work some more—as the entire medical staff were doing these days. They had to get as many people returned and out before the next attack. But even after several days of such work, and his back still aching fiercely, Megatron couldn't recharge.

He still reacted to Optimus strongly and physically. It unnerved and embarrassed him. Optimus hadn't gotten closer to him than a few feet and yet every centimeter of his plating seemed hypersensitive.

As he usually did, he crept from the room he shared with Ratchet. Anything was better than keeping himself still and quiet so as not to disturb Ratchet. Being in motion helped. Seeing the handful of people still online at this hour helped.

And sometimes, when he couldn't recharge and desperately wanted to be alone with his thoughts,

the supply closet on the second floor helped as well. He could sit there in the darkness and be alone with no one near him and *think*.

That night with Orion had been a mistake. Had he not received the Matrix, had his function not been turned rapidly upside down shortly thereafter, it might not have been an error. But he'd seen and he'd sacrificed Terminus less than two days after getting into berth with Orion and it didn't seem right.

But.

Terminus had told him not to wait.

Terminus would not be coming back.

Terminus had told Megatron to sacrifice him.

Guilt and grief roiled together in Megatron's spark. Guilt over Terminus. Grief over Terminus. Guilt over the fact he couldn't take his optics off of Optimus, even after telling Optimus he couldn't bear another relationship.

He was lonely. Oh, he had Ratchet and First Aid and more supportive mecha he might call friend than he had ever had before in his function, but he missed Terminus's solid bulk at his back terribly. He missed having someone he could lean into, he missed the gentle voice, he missed Terminus's hands, scratched and burred with years of labor, but still gentle as they traced his frame.

Heat and sadness spiked together in his frame, and he found himself tracing the edges of his panel, trying to pretend it was Terminus's hands, hoping that this might bring some good memory of him back. He wanted to remember his lover, not the revolutionary he'd sacrificed. Not the Terminus he'd turned his back on.

He closed his optics and tilted his helm back against the wall of the supply cabinet with a quiet thump, legs spreading. He thought of how Terminus's optics had glowed against the darkness of his little room, of the heat of him. Of the finger smoothing over his opening, pressing against his node.

He wanted to feel something other than grief.

He opened his panel and slipped two fingers into himself, just a little too fast, as Terminus had found he liked, and tried to imagine Terminus's hand there, Terminus over him.

But the feeling of his own valve on his fingers kept shaking him out of it; after a time he tried imagining Terminus watching him, as he so often had with murmured encouragement, promises, and his charge began to rise again.

He made a small noise, something between a grunt and a whimper, and pressed the back of his hand over his mouth, hips tilting into his moving fingers. Terminus liked it when he did that, thought his reluctance to make any sort of noise was endearing. The tilt of his hips gave him far better access to the interior nodes of his valve, rubbed his palm along his anterior node. He remembered Terminus telling him to self-service while he took his diagnostic port, and the thought wrung another choked-off whimper from his vocalizer. Pleasure rose and ebbed again, a slow heat between his legs. He tried to remember Terminus's voice, and could almost hear it again, but it always fuzzed away as he focused on it.

His movements became rough, and for a moment it seemed he might overload, but like Terminus's

voice it slipped away. He took his fingers from his valve and slid them quickly, roughly, over the hardness of his node, he took his spike in his other hand and still the overload would not come. The remembered encouragements from Terminus stuttered in his mind, slipping away, repeating as he forgot them.

He moved fast, hard over himself, frustration rather than memory guiding him, and still the pleasure rose, only to fall again, leaving him with the feeling of his spike in his hands, his node under his fingers, stronger than the sensation coming from either. He was wet, he could feel the fluids trickling over his aft, but overload would not come.

At last he gave up and leaned his head back once more, onlining his optics to stare at the ceiling with his fingers still around and in himself, and let out a quiet sob. His cheeks were wet with optical cleanser, his frame trembling with emotion, but for all his success he might have been fingering his medical ports.

He sat like that some time, then withdrew his fingers. He transformed everything away, wet and swollen but as dull to sensation as the rest of him, and reached for the cleaning rags his low-light vision showed him on the shelf opposite, cleaning himself off and putting them in the bin to be cleaned. After a moment, he remembered to wipe his face. He'd need to wash his fingers; he was sure they might smell of him, and he didn't want anyone to know about...

He wasn't sure what, really. That he was lonely? That he, too, was interested in interface? That any of this had ever happened?

Then he walked out of the supply closet and into the slumbering base.

He didn't want to go back to his shared room with Ratchet, though he checked to make sure Pharma hadn't come calling while he'd been away. But he couldn't recharge. Not there.

Tonight would be a night for pacing, it seemed.

Most of the Decepticons were used to this after the first few nights; he got a few nods from the people still around, and then he went up to the roof, where it was just him and that night's guards.

When he tired of that, he went back down into the base, mapping the corridors with his feet. He paused several times at the door Jazz had shown him, but never quite mustered the courage to go through. His steps turned toward the administrative center. Optimus had commented that they might give him an office there, though he didn't think he'd ever be in it. Pharma and Ratchet kept him busy enough.

The thought of Pharma made his mouth twist bitterly. Pharma, playing nicely for now, doubtless to some end that would give him greater control over Ratchet. He hated himself for going along with it—but he did need those skills.

He realized he was near the strategy room, where they'd met scant hours before, and that someone was there. He stepped inside, and found Optimus staring fixedly at the holodisplay, now dark.

"You too?" he said.

Optimus startled, then ran a hand over his face. "Yes," he said. "It's quiet right now. I don't trust it."

"I wouldn't," said Megatron. "Someone willing to attack fleeing civilians is capable of anything." He came to stand at Optimus's side, plating prickling with the proximity of the other mech.

“Is that what’s keeping you awake?”

Megatron shook his helm. “No.” Then, because he was horribly lonely, and his spark felt like it was wringing itself in two, and he’d already said everything he possibly could about it to Ratchet, “It’s Terminus.”

“Jazz told me. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” said Megatron, and knew he didn’t sound sincere. “I miss him,” he said after a time. “The Functionists took him from me twice. At least the second time they were kind enough to leave me with no illusions about his return.”

“If you simply need a friend,” said Optimus, “I am here.”

“Actually,” said Megatron, not entirely sure of whether he would actually follow through with what he planned to say until it was out of his mouth, “I may need more than a friend tonight.”

Optimus blinked at him in surprise, and then, as if he couldn’t help himself, moved closer. “Are you sure? I don’t want to rush you. You lost him, and he meant a lot.”

“He meant a lot,” said Megatron. “Yes. And that’s why.” He looked into Optimus’s optics. “I need someone to help me forget how we parted. I can’t do it alone. I...don’t know what else it might entail, beyond tonight. But I think that’s what I need tonight.”

Optimus’s mask flicked aside so fast it must have stung, and then his intake was on Megatron’s, a hand cradling his helm. He kissed hard and possessive, and there was indeed something familiar in it. Megatron opened his intake to the probing glossa with a small noise of pleasure.

Optimus moved away. Megatron followed. When they pulled away, both were venting hard. Megatron put his hands on Optimus’s hips, turning him so he could back him against the strategy table.

“*Don’t* be gentle,” he told Optimus, and dropped to his knees. He heard Optimus’s stifled gasp at that, and the other mech’s hips hitched forward as his panel slid aside and his spike pressurized. Megatron took it in hand and stroked it long and firm, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the slit. Optimus dropped a hand to his helm, resting it lightly on his cheek.

Megatron looked up at him, at the dim lust in the blue optics above him, and leaned forward to take the heft of the other mech’s spike into his mouth. Optimus made a stifled noise, hips hitching forward, the gentle hand on his cheek clenching hard enough to dent.

The idea of having his mouth fragged was arousing, of being held firmly in place with Optimus’s spike pumping in and out of him. Megatron moaned around the thick shaft and tongued the slit, working his throat calipers to allow it to slide deeper, overriding the protocols trying to make him gag. Optimus shuddered over him.

He didn’t want to be in charge of this. He wanted to have Optimus to have his frame roughly used for the other mech’s satisfaction. He didn’t want responsibility.

He couldn’t move his glossa much, but he did what he could, moving up and down on the shaft. Optimus was being far too polite—he at last took Optimus’s hips into his hands and moved them himself.

Optimus growled low, sending arousal prickling over Megatron’s frame, and the hand on Megatron’s cheek became firm and commanding as he finally thrust long and slow and firm into

Megatron's mouth. Megatron answered him with a moan, which earned him another savage noise of approval, and then Optimus was taking him in earnest.

Megatron's panels sprang open, his valve instantly clenching and wet, heat spiraling within him as his optics unfocused and he delighted in the feeling of the spike moving in him, the command of the hand on the side of his face, his hands on Optimus's hips as his mouth was roughly, gloriously fragged. Optimus moved into him with deliberation but no great gentleness, slow and smooth and hard. He rerouted his ventilations away from his intake, and looked up at the other mech. Optimus looked down at him, optics blazing, and his hand clenched, denting metal. His hips hitched forward hard and he overloaded with a muffled cry, withdrawing to paint Megatron's face with his transfluid.

He was still hard as he stepped back, his optics still blazing as he eyed Megatron appraisingly. Megatron knelt where he was, making no gesture to wipe the transfluid from the bridge of his nose and his lips, and waited with his hands folded in front of him, trembling with the force of his arousal. He bit his lip at the force of that gaze; he wondered if the floor between his legs was wet with it, but didn't want to look down to check.

"Get up," said Optimus, voice low and crackling with static. "Go to the table and bend over it with your hands behind your back."

Megatron brutally repressed the noise he wanted to make in response and staggered to his feet to obey, bending across the strategy table they'd debated across short hours before.

"Very good," said Optimus. Fingers slid against his inner thighs and parted them. "Legs wider," Optimus said, voice dropping into a rumble. "You're mine now."

Megatron moaned. The gutting pain that had been his companion all that evening was two steps away now, bearable, attenuated by submission.

He jolted when the first finger brushed over his valve, collecting his lubricants and rubbing them over his node. He pressed into it hard, optics shuttering.

"I'm surprised you didn't overload," said Optimus with dark amusement, and started to stroke. Megatron pressed his forehead into the glass of the holoprojector and whimpered. The transfluid on his face was cooling, sticky, and part of him was disappointed there wasn't more of it.

Optimus's other hand came down on his where they were clasped at the small of his back. "I'm going to spike you," he said. "I'm going to get you even wetter, and when you're begging, I'm going to fill this wet, tight little valve with my spike and frag you until you can't walk straight. Does that sound good to you, Megatron?"

Megatron answered him with another whimper, and Optimus stilled. "I said, does that sound good to you?"

"Yes," he managed, his voice small, and tried to push his hips backward into Optimus's hand. Optimus chuckled, laced with static, and pushed a finger into him. Megatron gasped.

"You're going to feel so good," said Optimus, sounding breathless. The finger pushed in and out, his thumb still moving on Megatron's node. Megatron pressed his face into the table and panted, trembling. "You're so wet. I bet you're going to overload as soon as you have my spike in you."

A second finger joined the first, in and out, then scissoring, spreading him wide.

"Stop teasing me," Megatron managed.

Optimus made a noncommittal hum.

“Please,” said Megatron. “Please spike me.”

Optimus faltered a little. “Are you sure?” he said. “It might hurt...”

“I’ll enjoy it,” Megatron reminded him, hips hitching back into his fingers.

The fingers withdrew. The pressure on his hands where they were pinned at the small of his back increased, and he felt the head of Optimus’s spike press against the lips of his valve. He made a helpless noise, and buried his face against the strategy table.

Optimus moved into him with the same firm, slow force as he had used Megatron’s mouth. Megatron tried to snap his hips back to get more of that, and Optimus’s hand clenched on his hip, holding him still. “Stop that,” he said. “You take this at the speed *I* want you to.”

Pain was appealing, but that was too. Megatron stopped struggling and went still, gasping with the slow pressure. He swore he could feel every ridge of that spike pushing into him, slow and irresistible. It was agonizing, and all he could do was sag against the table and take it.

Optimus buried himself to the hilt, slowly circling his hips, while Megatron shuddered with his calipers rippling. Optimus felt enormous in him. He’d gone limp, couldn’t seem to find the energy to do anything else, only lie there and wait for Optimus to decide what he wanted to use him for.

The thought sent a bolt of painful arousal to his array and he whimpered.

The spike shifted within him as Optimus leaned over him to whisper in his audial. “You said you didn’t want me to be gentle,” he said, teasing, with intent that lent an edge to it, and then pulled all the way out and slammed back in. Megatron made a muffled cry at it, and almost overloaded. And then Optimus did it again. And again, setting a brutal pace that offlined every protocol in Megatron’s processor that wasn’t occupied with the delight of being roughly fragged to an inch of his function.

He overloaded quickly with a gasping whimper, and Optimus fragged him through it. It was too much, but he was glad of the discomfort, of being able to squirm and not get away from it, the overstimulation—because it meant he wasn’t responsible for this, he was simply being used, and the pleasure/pain was something better than grief. Optimus would stop if Megatron told him to stop, he was sure, and though he opened his intake once, sure he would have to demand a reprieve, it never made it past his dentae, because this was better than the grief and if it stopped he’d have to deal with that.

He overloaded twice more before Optimus did again, pushing deep in and spilling there, an imagined rush of heat and wet that filled him with an exhilarated sense of being claimed. The thought and Optimus’s low cry pushed him over the edge again, and a finger brushed over his diagnostic port, exploring.

“I’d like to try this,” said Optimus quietly, a question in it, and he pulled fully out of Megatron, who lay for a moment, still trembling, across the table. Optimus’s hands took his shoulders and gently turned him over. Optimus caught his chin in one and tipped his face up for a long, slow kiss. “Do you want more?”

More? More of that escape, blissful and painful all at once? But it was a pain that was easy to bear, a pain that let sharp hard edges to pleasure and banished the feeling of his spark turning over on itself, eating away at itself in terrible loneliness and grief. The relief of that pain made facing it

again harder. Megatron tried to push himself up on shaking arms and nodded.

“Please,” he said.

Optimus’s fingers slid back into his valve, collecting the fluids there, dipping down to his port and rubbing gently at the smaller opening. Megatron leaned forward to steady himself by clinging to Optimus’s shoulder’s, gasping a little as Optimus worked the first digit inside. It was a different sensation than the sensitivity of his valve; while valves had originally been designed sensitive for the purpose of pleasure, the diagnostic port was sensitive to prevent rough handling and injury.

Optimus worked the next finger in, well-slicked, his motions slow and careful and Megatron leaned against him as his trembling eased to shivering. They were silent, the only sounds their whining fans and ragged venting. Megatron made a small hitching noise after a time, when Optimus got the third finger in and the other mech whispered in his audial, “You’re almost ready for me,” sliding the hard curve of his spike against the inside of Megatron’s thigh. After a time, the speed of the movement of those fingers increased, and Optimus turned and pressed them within him, lighting up the quiescent sensors, and Megatron found himself squirming involuntarily against the sensation, not sure if he wanted more or less. Optimus’s hips were making little movements, as if he could hardly bear *not* being buried in him yet, as if the sensations on his fingers translated directly to his spike. At last his patience faltered and he withdrew his fingers, took Megatron by the hips, and sank into him in one long, slow, gloriously unhesitating push.

Megatron’s optics sparked and flared and he arched into it, unconsciously presenting his chest and spark to Optimus as he did. The world went white, the long-primed sensors in his port all lighting up at once, and he choked out a staticky plea for more.

Optimus didn’t use his port as greedily as he had his valve, his attention focused on Megatron’s face and reactions. After a few of those lazy, rolling thrusts, he disengaged Megatron’s arms from his neck and laid him out on the table with his hands pinned over his head. Megatron wrapped his legs around Optimus’s aft and waist in return, and held onto Optimus’s neck, and was watched, the pressure of Optimus’s optics on him like a caress. He arched, mouth opening silently, as Optimus circled his hips, returned to his previous rhythm, and overloaded with a quiet grunt when Optimus reached down to his anterior node and played with it.

Optimus’s movements became a little more urgent at that, the handling of his node rougher, and he hunched possessively over Megatron’s frame, mouthing at Megatron’s neck cables. Megatron groaned, arching his neck to expose more of them, and Optimus’s dentae caught one and nipped hard enough to dent. Megatron buried his face against his arm and shook, feeling Optimus speed in him. He was well stretched and slick; his valve ached from use, but there was no discomfort from his port now. Pleasure built, his anterior node hot and hard under Optimus’s fingers, valve clenching on nothing, acutely aware of the hot slide of lubricant and Optimus’s spent transfluid down his aft. A finger pushed into his valve again, pushing against sore, fragged-out sensors, something else between pleasure and pain and it sent him over a second time, stiff and shuddering in Optimus’s arms.

Optimus’s thrusts grew ragged, irregular, far less careful, and at last his hips jerked forward and he filled Megatron yet again. Hot transfluid hit oversensitive sensors. Megatron’s hips hitched at the sensation. He felt filthy and claimed, and there was a flutter of what would have been arousal had every part of him not been so thoroughly exhausted.

Optimus gently withdrew with a kiss and a caress of his face. “Beautiful,” he said, and there was sincere admiration in his voice. “Are you all right?”

Megatron straightened his shoulders, and to his surprise said, “Yes,” and meant it. There was still

grief, but no more of the urgent, almost panicky misery of earlier that evening. He was very tired.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” said Optimus, and handed him a rag. “We’ll get the paint transfers off in the washracks—officers have one to themselves. Don’t worry about being seen.” He offered Megatron a small smile. “I know you prefer to keep these things private.”

Megatron returned that smile. “Thank you.”

Whether this was the *right* thing to do or not would wait until morning, but the lifting of the terrible dark cloud in his spark was worth it, and for now, all he wanted was to keep this feeling as long as he could.

It was late, but Starscream preferred to use the washracks late. Less chance of being interrupted, and the mech he was most likely to be interrupted by was Optimus. One of these days—when he’d set the groundwork correctly, of course—he’d venture beyond professionalism. Offer to help buff stains. Make his interest undeniable. Optimus was pretty, for a grounder, but all grounders lost their heads over Seekers. It’d be easy, once Optimus was relaxed enough.

He pressed the controls for the washracks and the door slid open. One of the spigots was on, and the room filled with steam; this late in the evening, you were assured of a hot wash. So Optimus was here—and then, turning the corner, he saw who he was here *with*.

Megatron stood in the steam facing Optimus, optics dim, his face tilted to receive a kiss, a hand on Optimus’s shoulder, the deadly talons gentle. Starscream looked down his frame, seeing the red and blue paint transfers garish on the white armor. On his back, between his thighs—Starscream’s lip curled in a sneer. So this was how the Prime planned to control Optimus. By spreading his legs like a cheap pleasure drone. You heard rumors about both medics and miners. Medics knew how to please a mech. Miners liked it rough, could take anything anyone wanted to do with them. It was probably a potent combination—it had to be, if it could get someone like Optimus to frag someone with an alt that ugly.

He wished he could have gotten a recording of it. Megatron moaning under Optimus, probably *crying* under him, would destroy the image the troops had of their heroic, stoic Prime. It’d fit with the rumors Starscream was spreading, that the Prime was too weak to do much good on the field, that his place was only civilian.

But he was too late now.

They were too busy kissing to notice him, and as he slipped away he saw Megatron turn to give Optimus his back to be scrubbed. Starscream paused. Among warframes, giving someone your back was a blatant proposition, one someone like Optimus would have a hard time resisting. If Optimus was going to get his spike back into Megatron (and who could resist that, the chance to have the Prime mewling helplessly under him), there was a chance of blackmail material, but instead Optimus scrubbed at the mech’s plating, saying something quiet that made Megatron laugh.

Thoroughly frustrated and disgusted, Starscream went to the general washracks.

Megatron had thwarted him.

Cleaning himself off, his optics narrowed at the memory of that kiss, at the implied intimacy of them cleaning one another off. No. He would not win Optimus’s affections now, not with

Megatron in the way. Optimus was enough of a fool that he might well trust Megatron more as a result of this. Mecha got stupid with a mouth wrapped around their spikes, on their valves. He would have to take a different tack.

He wasn't sure what made him angrier; that he'd lost the battle, or that Megatron, evidently, thought in a similar way as he did. He'd done in a week what Starscream had been trying to do for months. He'd done it successfully.

Only one of them would be second in command of the Decepticons, successfully using Optimus as a puppet leader. Starscream's lips skinned away from his dentae in a snarl. Only one of them *could* be the *true* leader of the Decepticons.

He had no intention of answering to Megatron, of sharing with Megatron.

Either through death—though that hadn't been successful the first time—or through disgrace in Optimus's optics, Megatron had to fall.

Chapter End Notes

I would hope it's unnecessary to note that a) Optimus and Megatron's ways of engaging in intimacy could do with *significant* improvement in the communication department, and b) human butts and robot diagnostic ports are not analogous, and any communication of material between vagina and anus is a very bad idea, leading to microorganisms growing happily where they should not, DO NOT DO THIS.

Happy holidays. ;)

Chapter 60

Ratchet stretched, pulling plating and struts and servos out of the hunched position he'd been in for hours now. "All right, Megatron, we're done. Get cleaned up and go get some fuel."

Megatron gave him the usual little grave smile, and went to do as he was told. Ratchet resisted the urge to scrub a hand over his face; all of them were covered in energon and oil. It had been a simple surgery that had turned complicated; the patient had an undiagnosed fuel pump irregularity.

It had taken both of them and Pharma and First Aid to stabilize him, and then it had been another six hours of surgery to fix both the fuel pump and complete the rewiring they'd set out to do.

"He's good," said Pharma from behind him, and Ratchet flinched. "You trained him well."

Ratchet looked up at him, startled. Pharma reached out and put a hand on his shoulder; when Ratchet began to move away, Pharma's hand moved with him. "I shouldn't have doubted either of you," he said, and then turned away.

Ratchet settled his armor back. Pharma hadn't even hurt him. But he felt himself shaking anyway.

What did Pharma want?

Starscream watched Megatron that afternoon and evening, and was annoyed to see how little awareness the mech seemed to have of what he'd done. If he, Starscream, had seduced Optimus, no one would have heard the end of it. It would be protection against the more...unsavory elements of their movement, if he made it clear that he had Optimus, leader of the Decepticons and (thanks to his new fusion cannon) the Slagmaker at his beck and call.

But Megatron seemed to be happy to keep it silent.

Starscream couldn't imagine why.

There probably was a reason. And a good one. Which was why he immediately started spreading the news as far as he could.

Megatron collected two rations of fuel and went to find Ratchet. That was easy enough; the other mech was bent over a pile of datapads, entering patient notes into a terminal. It was slow, unpleasant work they were all doing these days, because the mismatched ages of the datapads meant they couldn't all be simply plugged into the central terminal. Fixing it was well beyond anyone's programming expertise; all their abilities were focused on caring for patients, not non-sentient computers.

Megatron closed the office door and put one of the cubes down at Ratchet's hand and sat

opposite him, eying him with concern. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"Wishing certain people would let me work instead of bothering me," said Ratchet, typing.

"Yes, because you can't have one of the assistants do that," said Megatron. "Fuel. I've heard it's good for you."

Ratchet snorted. "Just because you have a shiny bauble in your chest doesn't mean you should be bossing me around," he said. But he took the cube anyway and sipped at it.

"Actually, my understanding is that it means exactly that," said Megatron, teasing.

"Give a mech an artifact and declare him the next best thing to Primus and it goes right to his head," said Ratchet. "What do you want, kid?"

"How are you doing, Ratchet?" asked Megatron again. "You've been quiet of recent. I'm worried."

"And you shouldn't be."

Megatron sighed, trying not to sound too exasperated. "Ratchet. Don't think I haven't noticed that Pharma's up to something. I really doubt he's teaching me out of the goodness of his spark, or because he's *that* impressed with my abilities."

"You sound paranoid."

"With some people, it's not paranoia." Megatron sat and stared at the older mech. "He hurt you," he said. "I saw the evidence. You have every reason to be suspicious of him, and every reason to avoid him."

Ratchet glanced up at him, back at the terminal. His shoulders hunched. "He doesn't want to annul the conjunx ritus," he said. Muttered, rather.

"I see," said Megatron. "And you do."

"Of course I do," said Ratchet to the terminal. "What kind of stupid question is that?"

Megatron shrugged a shoulder. "You haven't been eager to discuss this."

"I wonder why."

There were more things he wanted to prod at, to discuss, but every inch of Ratchet's frame indicated that would be a really bad idea. He sighed. Ratchet was right. He needed the training that Pharma could offer him. But he had to make it clear to Ratchet that this wouldn't mean he'd abandon him, or that he had to spend time around Pharma, and he was very much aware that Pharma might drop him like something radioactive if he didn't get whatever it was he wanted.

"I'm going to the refugee camp," he said instead. "Would you like to accompany me?"

"Why," said Ratchet, still addressing the computer. Megatron's impertinence in asking wasn't going to be forgotten anytime soon.

"Because I think the Decepticons are making a mistake in not including them, and I'm worried about the conditions there." Megatron drank his cube and stood. "Now, do you want to go meet new and interesting mecha, or stay here and do data entry?"

Ratchet looked up at him, then shut down the terminal and sorted the datapads back into their locked drawers. He did it slowly. Megatron watched with amusement. Ratchet was obviously trying to annoy him.

“Fine,” said Ratchet at last. “Let’s go.”

“Have you been there before?” asked Megatron as they made their way through the base to the connecting door.

“No. Medical cases get sent to us,” said Ratchet. He frowned as Megatron opened the door for him, and frowned more deeply as they began the trek through the abandoned factory. “Why?”

“Wasn’t sure if you knew what to expect,” said Megatron. He led the way. “They looked well-enough cared for, but...”

“But...?”

“I’m concerned.” Megatron huffed out a vent. “Think about the attitudes the Decepticons have about civilians. You got ‘tested’ too, didn’t you?”

“Tested?” Ratchet sounded dubious.

“Someone threatened you with violence for doing your job,” said Megatron. “They told me it was a test afterward. To see how much of a civilian I was.”

Ratchet went very quiet.

“That’s why I’m worried about them,” said Megatron. “We’re medics. They have to behave themselves with us, at least to an extent. But these people...”

“They have no protection,” said Ratchet. “They’re not useful.”

“Exactly. I think some people here are more interested in seeing themselves become the powerful ones, rather than upending the entire system. It’s not the system they have problems with; it’s that they’re not the ones running it.”

“And who might that be,” says Ratchet, in such a tone it’s clear he’s thinking of Starscream.

“Whoever it is, I think that these people are going to be at the bottom of whatever new order they create,” said Megatron. “And I will not stand for that.”

Ratchet was silent a few minutes, then, “No. I suppose you won’t.”

“You suppose?”

Ratchet was silent still longer.

“You did change,” he said at last. “When you got the Matrix. I think it was a good thing but sometimes I’m surprised at the way you act. You do things you would never have done before you received it. You *say* things that I wouldn’t have expected from you. And I don’t know if that’s the Matrix, or who you really are.”

“I’d prefer to think of it as the latter,” said Megatron. He heard uncertainty in his own voice, though he’d tried to hide it under wry humor.

“What you did on the battlefield was remarkable,” said Ratchet. “Something the Decepticons admired. Something that earned you a place with them. I didn’t know if you’d want it.”

“I don’t see that I have to choose one or the other,” said Megatron. “They’re allies.”

“For how long?” asked Ratchet. “You just remarked on this yourself. They have little patience for civilian models, people who had more rights under the Functionists than they did.”

Megatron considered this, offering Ratchet a hand up onto the next walkway. Yes, there was still a deep rage when he considered those inequalities. Yes, part of him sympathized deeply with the Decepticons who had no use for the lightweight civilian models who had never, in their opinions, suffered properly, who were only coming here and expecting protection now that things were going bad.

But. But. He hadn’t done what he’d done in order to have different people to look down on. A new Cybertron, free from alt mode discrimination, wasn’t just for him and the manual labor frames. It was for everyone. It had to be for everyone, even if he personally wanted nothing more than to deliver a slap upside the helm—as he did with Pharma and Starscream.

“You expect my past to blind me,” he said at last.

“I’d expect it to blind *anyone*,” said Ratchet. He stopped, forcing Megatron to halt as well. Ratchet met his optics, his expression difficult to read. Something between a searching gaze and a terrible sympathy and concern. Megatron wouldn’t have accepted it from anyone else. “Megatron, what they did to you was horrific. They took so much from you because you were inconvenient, and you fought your way around it anyway. *Without* the Matrix. It wasn’t just the processor skips, it was the way you question things, it was your confidence, your anger—those are terrible things to lose, and they took them. Because it was convenient and they hated you. Anyone who went through that and recovered and now can *recognize* the horror of what they did... Primus, Megatron, most people wouldn’t be able to think straight for rage, and yet here you are.” He took a step forward now. “You can still feel sympathy for the people who *didn’t* suffer what you did. So many mecha—like Starscream—would have decided that, because you suffered, they should too. And you haven’t decided this. You’re trying to help all of them. And now I know that I’ve only mentored an injured version of you—now I know just *how* injured you were—I question many of my assumptions.”

Megatron looked at him with confusion. All these things Ratchet described as if they were great and remarkable were things he hadn’t questioned, and he wondered abruptly if it were the Matrix that made the difference. “I didn’t think of it that way,” he said, and no more; they were at the entrance to the refugee camp.

“Primus, that’s a lot of them,” said Ratchet as they looked out over the camp.

Megatron braced himself, and then began the climb down into the makeshift city. Once he reached the ground, he was impressed; though the accommodations were in many places little more than tarps connected to poles, there was an effort to keep things neat and well-lit.

“They’re doing well,” said Ratchet.

“That’s ‘cause Prowl’s running the place,” said Jazz, from behind them. “Hi there Megs, I see you remembered our little tour the other day. Docbot, good to see you.”

“Did you follow us here?” asked Megatron, and Jazz shrugged. “Don’t ask questions you

don't want answers to."

"I'll take that as a yes," said Megatron. "They must have some need for medical attention. No one would make that journey for a minor issue, still less if one was used to the problem."

"Of course not," said Jazz. "They do what they can. I'm sure they'll be happy to see you." His tone was light, but Megatron looked closely at him. He had the strong sense that Jazz had just won some sort of victory.

"Where should we set up?" he asked.

"This way. Prowler got a spot cleared out, just in case. Be warned, it's gonna be sort of primitive."

Megatron huffed air out of his vents, thinking of repairing Terminus by touch deep in the mines. "Believe me, we'll manage."

"So," said Jazz, once Megatron was occupied talking with a patient and carefully stripping paint to find the extent of an old injury, "what do you think?"

"About what?" said Ratchet.

"About Megatron." Ratchet stared at him. Jazz added, "You know, the Prime? Big and gray and worried? Standing right over there?"

"I don't think I really care to talk about my apprentice with someone I barely know," said Ratchet, with an edge to his voice.

"Primus's exhaust, you're wound up," said Jazz. "Look. We're worried about the refugees. Glad you two came down, but Starscream talking about putting them to work? Worried me."

"Yeah," said Ratchet, remembering Megatron's account of exactly that. "It should have."

They watched Megatron at work a few moments longer.

"He's good with them," said Jazz quietly.

"He's good with everyone," said Ratchet. He looked hard at Jazz. "Whatever your game is? Don't you dare use him. Don't you dare treat him as a pawn. Do you understand me?"

"Of course," said Jazz. "Last thing on my mind," and Ratchet knew he was lying.

Chapter 61

They were staring at him as he worked, a small crowd of brightly colored mecha. All of them civilian frames, all of them at least a head shorter than him. Most of their optics were blue. They were very much like the administrators and medics and staff who'd sneered at him at the Iacon Medical Academy, very like his glimpses of mine administration long ago, the medic who had evaluated Terminus and left him in Megatron's arms. *Not worth the cost of recovery.*

But they weren't those people. He reminded himself of it with every vent. They weren't those people, and here and now, they were the helpless ones.

It was very hard to make himself really believe that.

In the meantime, he could treat them. And pretend not to notice the staring optics.

"There," said he said to a small yellow courier-class mech, spraying medication onto the wound he'd just finished welding. "This should address the rust and whatever other nasty microorganisms might get into the injury. No repainting, no touching, no sanding for a week, do you understand me? I'll come back after that and do the detailing for you."

"Sure," said the mech on the makeshift slab, and hopped off, with a great deal more confidence than he'd climbed on. He'd spent the first part of the procedure staring round-opticked at Megatron, his hand limp in Megatron's own as he was examined. Megatron wasn't sure if it was awe or fear. Now he was guessing awe. "Thanks, doc." He stuck out his uninjured hand. "Name's Bumblebee. If you need anything brought to you, anything looked at, let me know. Sorry I can't like, pay you or anything, but scouting and transport? That I can do."

"Payment isn't necessary, but I'll keep it in mind, Bumblebee," said Megatron.

The next patient startled him; a long lean noblemech in blue and white, moving stiffly. He eased himself up onto the slab, gaze fixed on Megatron.

"You're the Prime," he said.

"I am." Megatron kept his voice noncommittal but noticed how the other mecha watching moved a little closer.

Evaluating golden optics swept over him. "The servo in my right elbow isn't working properly," the noble said after a pause, and extended the limb. "I haven't been able to fix it myself."

"Hm," said Megatron, and began to examine the limb. "And what brought you here?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Understandable." Megatron found the reason for the hitch, a frayed tensile cable that looked as if it had been twisted. It was an old injury, the fuzzed ends of the broken strands worn, and as he debated whether he should replace the cable entirely, he tried to imagine what would have caused it.

"I'll be disconnecting your pain receptors and replacing this entirely," he said aloud, reaching into his medical kit. "These don't heal well—as you've already found."

The scenario his processor presented him with was that someone had seized this mech's arm and

twisted it almost out of its socket, struts grinding against cables. It was something that wouldn't leave overt injuries. A way to hurt a mech without making it apparent.

Megatron was sure that it was connected to why the mech would rather not say anything about how the injury was incurred. Just the sort of thing a noble house might do to a member who had misbehaved. Painful, easily hidden. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Mirage." The mech was still examining him. It was like being watched by an injured turbofox; he had a sudden vivid memory of the one that had gotten into the mines. Who knew how long it had been there, scavenging the scraps of energon too small to send for processing, but at some point its luck had run out, and its leg had been snapped by a rockfall. He'd done his best to set and splint the limb. In return, it had done its best to shred his hand.

"Just a few more moments, Mirage," he said, hooking the cable into its housing on one end, and carefully stretching it to fit the other. "You'll need to be gentle with it while it integrates, but you'll be at full functionality within the week."

"Thank you." There was little inflection to the reply. But he hadn't actually been bitten yet, so he was pleased enough. Mirage slipped off the slab when he was done and went to one of the mecha waiting there, green and heavy-framed. There was no way that mech was a noble, but the way he looked at Mirage was far too familiar to Megatron; he'd seen that look in Terminus's optics, felt it in his own. *Conjunct*, or nearly so, said that deep affection, and the care with which the green mech moved. He could construct possible scenarios from that—Mirage's house had probably taken exception to his choice of courtmate, hurt him and left him with little choice but to flee.

"My dentae *hurt*," said a small red mech, all but vaulting up onto the slab. "Can you fix it?"

"It depends. Let me see them." The cause was clear enough; about midway back in his mouth, the mech's dental plates were bent. It would absolutely be painful—and probably too minor to justify sending him back to the main base for treatment. "What did you do?"

The mech almost removed the tips of Megatron's fingers in his eagerness to reply. "I bit an Enforcer! He was trying to grab me and Bumblebee, but their armor is *hard*."

"I can see that," said Megatron. "And you bit him hard, too. Open up."

The mech looked proud of himself, and complied. Megatron went to work to straighten the bent plates, thinking as he did.

Bit him hard was an understatement. That would have *hurt*. The mech must have been very desperate or very angry or both to injure himself that way in the course of fighting his opponent, and it was a dedication he'd been told was vital to a warrior. Ironhide had remarked Megatron, at least, didn't lack that dedication. It was very hard to acquire.

And here was this tiny courier frame absolutely brimming with it, enough to bite an Enforcer hard enough to dent his own dentae, and boast about it.

He was certainly having to reevaluate his opinions of these mecha.

He finished working on the mech's mouth, and used a sanitation packet to clean the oral lubricants off of himself and the tools.

"Hey," the mech said, "think you can put in a good word for me? I've been trying to apply to join the fighters and they keep ignoring me."

Megatron paused in his motions, processing that. There were willing fighters here and they were being refused. He couldn't say he was surprised. But it was an indication of something very, very wrong.

"I will," he said aloud. "What's your name?"

"Cliffjumper," the little mech said, and looked like he was going to say something else before getting distracted prodding at his newly fixed dentae with his glossa.

"It's not just Cliff who wants to *do something*," said Bumblebee. The small red, blue and gray Praxian next to him nodded enthusiastically. "But they all tell us we're too small."

"Way too delicate," said the Praxian. "And I'm not delicate. We're not delicate. I mean most Decepticons are *huge*, but if someone could just teach us how to deal with huge 'bots we'd be fine. We're willing. But they call us tiny and laugh at us, or pick us up and shake us, that happened to Cliff because they said he was being a pest."

Mirage, still watching, slid forward through the crowd with the heavier frame trailing him. "I have an outlier ability," he said quietly. "It would be useful. I haven't been able to speak to the right people about it because the recruiter dismissed me out of hand. At this point, I doubt that the Decepticons would have a place for me—for any of us who don't look like them."

"And there's other skills too," said someone. "But if you're not a big bruiser who's good at hitting people really hard, they're not interested in you."

There was a chorus of agreement.

"There are more and more Decepticons and they're more and more military," said someone else far back in the crowd, which parted a little to reveal a medium-sized red mech with a microscope alt. "There are even a few miners and heavy labor frames here who arrived later on, and no one's come through to recruit them."

"How recently did they arrive?" asked Megatron.

They told him. He compared it mentally to the date Ratchet gave him for Starscream's arrival and his frown deepened. It matched.

There was a pattern emerging here. It wasn't as if the Decepticons were winning the war already. It was tight enough, fraught enough, that it made no sense that heavy labor frames were being ignored. But if Starscream wanted an army largely loyal to him, and thought he had some sort of advantage that might win him the war that had nothing to do with numbers...

Megatron's optics narrowed. He didn't like this at all. Starscream was up to something, and he was so sure it would work that he was completely ignoring resources at his disposal. And Starscream didn't like these people.

He glanced back at Ratchet and Jazz. Ratchet looked worried. Jazz, standing a little way back with his arms folded, simply looked evaluating. Prowl had joined him, standing close with his helm tilted to one side.

This was a test.

His estimation of Jazz's intelligence ticked up considerably. So did his annoyance; he wished they could have simply told him, rather than manipulating him into this situation. But at the same time, he understood why they'd done it this way. Even Ratchet hadn't been entirely sure of his response.

He wasn't sure of his response. And here he was, standing with all these optics on him, a political bomb tossed into his proverbial hands and he had to make a decision. These people, or his people?

Because even with the frustration of their optics on him, he knew they weren't his people. They wouldn't understand him the way that Impactor or Deadlock did. He wouldn't understand them. Ratchet only made sense to him after years of close acquaintance. With whatever Starscream was planning hanging over them all, this might very well be a choice between the refugees, these people whom he did not understand, and the Decepticons.

He knew which side Ratchet would choose. He could already see it in his optics.

All other considerations aside, what Starscream was planning was very unlikely to increase any sort of equality. Starscream wanted power. He had to be opposed. And even if Megatron himself didn't find himself sympathizing with the people most likely to be hurt by Starscream's ambition, that was no excuse to keep from doing what needed to be done. His own comfort was tertiary at best.

The refugees were still staring at him, worried and unsettled and unhappy, brightly colored plating fluffed with anxiety.

He vented heavily.

"None of this is right," he said. "I will see what I can do."

Chapter 62

They swarmed Megatron after that, the mecha redirected to Ratchet looking disappointed. Ratchet couldn't blame them; Megatron had finally listened to them and their fears, and now was practically *shedding* calm reassurance all over the place as he treated minor injuries and illnesses. And it was that reassurance they wanted more than the actual medical treatment.

"That went well," said Jazz out of the side of his mouth. His focus was almost entirely on Megatron, his arms still folded.

"I'm not entirely sure what you won, but I know you got something you wanted," said Ratchet, equally quietly. "Mind sharing with the class?"

"These people need a protector. A champion," said Jazz. "I was hoping Megatron might be that mech; Optimus sure as frag hasn't stepped up. And here we are."

"I see," said Ratchet.

"Would you have expected his help?" asked Jazz. "Really? Knowing what they did to him?"

Ratchet was silent. *Not until I asked directly, and when he told me I believed him.* But Jazz, he was realizing, didn't ask directly. Didn't approach anything directly. And probably didn't believe anything he was told immediately, either.

"I didn't," said Prowl on his other side. "Starscream has been working to alienate us, and Optimus is too trusting for his own good. Now, Optimus is all but *sequestered* by Starscream. Soundwave isn't doing much in either direction. It's bad, Ratchet. Starscream's proposal to use the refugees tells us a lot. He's been thinking it for a while. Now he feels bold enough to say it out loud in front of Optimus. And Optimus didn't slap him down for it."

"He'll get bolder yet if there's no one opposing him," said Jazz. "And the mech most likely to stop him is Megatron."

"So you've thrown him in Starscream's path," said Ratchet. "Starscream, who's very popular and a warframe. Megatron doesn't even have build-in weaponry!"

Jazz snorted gracelessly. "You're a really bad liar. Ironhide's been teaching him to use that sword of his, and I know we confiscated that thing off him when he was arrested. He's far from defenseless, Ratchet, though I appreciate your efforts to protect him."

"Frag off," said Ratchet, folding his arms.

"It's okay," said Jazz. "After everything? You've got every reason to be defensive."

"Frag off," repeated Ratchet.

"But you can't protect him," said Prowl. "Your ability to do so was limited even when you first met him, though you did a remarkable job with it. But once the Matrix accepted him, you had no hope. He's a target—and one of those dangers comes from inside him. The Matrix isn't kind to its bearers."

Ratchet looked at Megatron and saw him falling again and shuddered hard.

“I’m sorry,” said Jazz. “You have to let him do what he must.”

“But I don’t have to let you use him however you want,” snapped Ratchet. “He’s a person. He’s not one of your pawns. He’s had enough of that to last him a lifetime.”

“He’s a Prime,” said Prowl. “He’ll always be a pawn.”

Starscream was going to have to make things move a little bit faster. He had to have a victory, a big one, and soon—take Optimus’s attention off Megatron, put it on himself. Get the admiration of the Decepticons.

The Decepticons, at least, were reliable. But that wasn’t enough.

He had another plan that he could hurry just a little more.

Skywarp and Thundercracker followed close on his thrusters, the cold clean air ripping past him. Starscream had registered this as a scouting mission. Skywarp and Thundercracker wouldn’t betray him—and he’d persuaded them that he was doing this in earnest. That it was a better way to end this war.

They didn’t know the entire plan, but by the time they found out, they’d be just as happy with it as he was. After all, as the lieutenants under the true ruler of Cybertron, they would have anything they wanted. Optimus would nominally stay in power, because assassination attempts weren’t something Starscream was willing to put up with. He’d played with the idea of taking the Matrix from Megatron once he was offlined, but decided against it because of just that. Besides, there was the chance the bauble might actually act as advertised, and he had even less patience for *that*.

They had an uneventful flight through territory that should have been held heavily against them. Well behind Functionist lines, they landed. It was supposed to be a peaceful meeting, but Starscream powered up his weapons anyway.

Their contact stepped out of a temporary shelter. Starscream resisted the urge to make a face, seeing him. That single golden optic was creepy as frag. But needs must. This mech could get him what he wanted.

“Starscream,” said the mech. “You’re late.”

“I came when I could,” said Starscream. “Not all of us live the nice comfortable life you do.”

“Your humor, as always, fails to be amusing.”

“Just like your criticism.” Starscream folded his arms. “Well? Did your people come through?”

“You’ll be invited to speak to the Senate as the Decepticon ambassador in two months’ time,” said his contact. “I will do no more. My contacts are not what they were.”

“If you betray me--,”

“Betraying my chance to destroy the institution that did this to me would be illogical,” said the mech, with a gesture at himself with his single remaining hand. “All my interests hinge on having the Senate removed. If you can indeed remove them for me, that will make the investment

worthwhile.”

“When?” pressed Starscream. “I need dates.”

“I will not give you dates. I will give you the contact information of the relevant parties.” The mech dug around in his subspace and produced a datachip. “Here.”

Starscream snatched it. “This had better work.”

“That,” said the mech, already turning away, “depends on you.”

Starscream did not like being dismissed like that. “You know,” he called after the mech’s retreating back, “the Prime’s still alive.”

Then he transformed and took off.

“Hey. Optimus, isn’t it?”

Optimus looked up from his desk at the interloper. There were so many Decepticons these days it took him a moment to place the other mech. “Good evening. Impactor, right?”

“Yeah,” said Impactor, and slouched insolently into the office. He made a show of examining it as if he were an inspector, the corner of his mouth going up in a sneer. Optimus sat and watched him, more amused than anything. It wasn’t as if the people who joined the Decepticons were renowned for their social skills.

“How can I help you?” he asked. Impactor turned around and looked at him with a remarkably cold expression.

“I’m hearing *rumors*,” he said. “About you and Megatron. Now, I’ve got no interest in the mech these days. He’s moved on. And Terminus is dead, so he doesn’t really have any interest either. So this ain’t jealousy.” He moved forward and braced both arms on the desk. One hand, one harpoon. “But I wanna make it really clear. There’s people here interested in his wellbeing and you will treat him well, got it? I hear one thing about you treating him otherwise and we’re gonna have a problem.”

Optimus wasn’t sure how to respond. He wanted to point out that Megatron was his own mech. That neither of them had this kind of a say over his function.

But Impactor, presumably, had known Megatron longer. Megatron’s fall had hit Optimus hard enough. He couldn’t imagine what it would have done to a friend. It made sense that Impactor might be over-protective.

“You’ve known him for a while, haven’t you,” he said.

“Him and Terminus,” said Impactor. “Known him since he was writing poetry on his breaks and hid under tables when fighting started. He’s a nerd. Always has been. And if he wants to frag a jumped-up cop, so be it. But that cop better know he’s being watched.”

“You know,” said Optimus, slowly, “you’re not the first mech to tell me this. Ratchet made some remarkably explicit threats.”

“Yeah Terminus said he was a decent sort.” Impactor held out his hand. “I think we’re done here, though. Yeah?”

“We are,” said Optimus, and managed not to wince at the handshake, a threat all by itself.

Even surrounded by curious, worried Autobots, they ran out of work eventually. Megatron helped Ratchet back through the connecting labyrinth in silence. When they’d almost reached the other side, Ratchet put out a hand to stop him.

“Are you going to help them?”

Megatron looked down, startled. “Yes,” he said, and meant it. “They’re being ignored because they’re inconvenient. That’s not what this is about.”

“Yes,” said Ratchet. He turned away again, his shoulders slumping. Megatron frowned and reached out to rest his hand, carefully, on one. Ratchet jolted and stared up at him. Megatron started to remove his hand.

“You don’t usually tolerate physical contact,” Ratchet said.

“What’s wrong?” said Megatron. He didn’t like the sadness in Ratchet’s face. “You talked with Jazz and Prowl; did either of them say something?”

Ratchet sighed heavily. Then, quietly, “You know they’re putting you between Starscream and those people, don’t you?”

Megatron blinked. He’d thought he was putting himself there. But further consideration made Ratchet’s statement far more likely. “And?”

“Between Starscream, and his army, and what he *wants*,” said Ratchet, frustration in his voice. “He’ll kill you.”

“If he can,” said Megatron. He wasn’t particularly perturbed; Starscream was more experienced, but he was far larger, far better armored, and if the Senate hadn’t managed it...

“Always confident, aren’t you,” said Ratchet, bitter.

“What else can I do?” Megatron asked. “No matter where I stand, I’m between Starscream and what he wants. He doesn’t want a Prime around. He doesn’t want anyone between him and leadership of the Decepticons. Why not make it matter?”

“They’re using you as a pawn,” said Ratchet.

“Of course they are.” Megatron realized the depth of Ratchet’s unhappiness and knelt in front of him, very carefully, on the catwalk. “Ratchet, I’ve never *not* been a pawn, except very early on in my function, before I started writing. When I was one more disposable body deep in the mines. No one cares enough about disposables to use them as pawns. Trepan only tried to do what he did because I became a threat. That was better than insignificance, no matter the price.” It hurt to say, but Terminus would have agreed. “It meant I was doing something that mattered. The Matrix is the next step. And just because someone’s trying to use me as a pawn doesn’t mean they’re not

moving me to somewhere I want to go.”

Ratchet looked completely unconvinced.

“I have work to do,” said Megatron softly. “It will not be easy. But at last, it is the work I *want* to do. And that matters, Ratchet. It matters more than I think you can understand.”

Ratchet reset his vocalizer with a click. “Yeah, you’re damn well right about that,” he said, and got right up in Megatron’s face with a finger under his nose. Megatron concentrated on Ratchet rather than the finger; otherwise, his optics would have crossed. “But you’re not allowed to die again, do you understand me?”

“I will take that under advisement,” said Megatron dryly, and got jabbed in the chestplates for his pains.

He straightened, rubbing his chestplates, and shook his helm a little at the older mech. “Trust me, Ratchet,” he said softly.

“Oh I do,” said Ratchet. “With everything except for your own damn life.”

There was no winning that. Megatron simply started walking again, opening the door for Ratchet.

For all his bold words, he had little idea of what he was working toward. Only what he was against. Starscream. The Functionists. A society that left people behind, forgotten and ignored.

But there were concrete steps to be taken.

He left Ratchet at their habsuite and went in search of Optimus.

It was late. The corridors were darker now. Megatron remembered something about turning down the lights during the later shifts for energy conservation. He headed for Optimus’s office, since the mech seemed to spend most of his time there. He was tired, the events of the day an alarming whirl. He wasn’t entirely sure if he was looking for interface or conversation.

He was debating this as he went, deeply distracted, when something sharp jabbed into the plating on his lower back.

“Hello, Megatron,” said Starscream’s voice behind him, and claws closed over the front of his neck as well, touching his major energon and neural lines. “Have a moment?”

“Only a moment,” said Megatron, his vents speeding. He carefully evened them out again. “What do you want, Starscream?”

“You to stop playing games,” said Starscream, utterly assured. “You know I’m going to win.”

“I don’t play games.”

Starscream’s claws traced the shapes of Megatron’s armor, their knife-tips a threat. “You see,” said Starscream, “I don’t care if you started this revolution. I don’t care what you’re in it for. But this is my show. And you don’t get to arrive and act as if you outrank me, do you understand me? Optimus might want to get between your legs but that doesn’t mean you should be running anything, do you understand me?”

“I don’t see why you should be running anything,” said Megatron. “You do decently in an advisory position, but command? I’ve seen nothing to recommend you.”

Starscream did scratch him for that, but it wasn't anything tender. "Watch your mouth."
"No," said Megatron. "You have no chance of making my death look like an accident, Starscream. Vicious you may be, but committing a murder if there's any chance of it being pinned on you? Impossible. I'm perfectly safe."

To prove his point, he stepped forward. Starscream's claws released. He turned to face the Seeker. "There are other ways to get what you want, Starscream. Threatening me—or any of my people—won't work. If you hurt any of them, you will still have to deal with me. And under those circumstances? Don't rely on Optimus to protect you."

"Optimus protect me?" sneered Starscream. "You seem desperate enough for protection if you're fragging him."

Megatron looked at him, totally unimpressed. "And somehow you think that's significant?"

Then he turned and walked away, armor stiff with rage.

Optimus had some explaining to do. If Starscream knew, someone was talking. It wasn't Megatron. While attaching significance to who was fragging whom was still an alien concept to him, he strongly preferred privacy.

And he hadn't been the one to break confidence.

Chapter 63

Optimus's delight at seeing Megatron evaporated as Megatron closed the door hard and folded his arms with a glare.

"Starscream knows about us," he said sternly. "No one learned about this from me."

Optimus sighed heavily. "I just had Impactor here," he said. "Lecturing me about treating you correctly. I'm guessing someone saw us."

Megatron growled low in his throat. "I would have preferred to keep it private," he said, but the direct anger was gone.

"So would I, but it doesn't seem we have that option anymore," said Optimus. He rose and stepped around the desk. "I am sorry for it, though."

"Yes, Starscream seems to think that I'm doing it to influence you," said Megatron. His mouth was a flat, unamused line, one corner pulled downward into a deep crease. Optimus shouldn't have found it endearing. He moved closer and reached out a careful hand to Megatron's face, hesitating a moment to see if it would be accepted.

Megatron glanced at it, and tilted his head a little into Optimus's palm.

"You don't need to interface with me to influence me," said Optimus quietly. "We're all here because of you."

Megatron met his optics. The corner of his mouth quirked. "Well, that's good to know. Tell me, what *are* the long term plans for the refugees?"

Optimus hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "I'm reluctant to throw them into battle, but..."

"I don't think they'll be as adverse to fighting as you think. They're bored, Optimus. It's beyond time to make them part of the Decepticons, rather than wards."

"Still. They're inexperienced. Starscream's bringing in military mecha—I'm not sure we should put the civilians at risk."

Megatron hummed, a noncommittal noise. "If they want to fight..."

"I'm not sure they know enough to make that decision responsibly," said Optimus. "They're civilians. They won't know what they're getting themselves into. And if we can keep them out of danger, we should."

"Isn't that their decision?" There was an edge to Megatron's voice. "Irresponsible or no? Are we really doing so well we can do without them?"

"We'll manage." Optimus heard the disapproval in his own voice. "I'm sorry. I just don't think it's right, throwing inexperienced people into battle."

Megatron looked at him long and hard. "You realize you're verging on Functionism," he said. "Their previous lives, their alt modes, are more important than their sparks or their determination."

"This is different," said Optimus, with a flare of anger. "This isn't about denying people

what they need to be happy. This is about saving their fragging lives, Megatron. They aren't soldiers. They won't know what they're doing."

"They can learn," said Megatron. His mouth had set again, his voice stubborn. If he weren't so enraging, it would have been endearing.

"Megatron," said Optimus, "I am not putting the civilians in danger, and that's final."

Megatron stared steadily at him. "And you're being an idiot, Optimus," he said flatly.

"Starscream assures me that we don't need them," said Optimus. "It wouldn't be right to force them into battle."

Megatron stepped away. "Yes, I'm quite sure Starscream has decided opinions. Foolishly enough, I thought you'd have your own."

"Megatron—"

"I'm going to recharge," said Megatron. "If you need me, I'll be in the medbay. I'm happy to talk to you once you've gotten over this little bout of Functionistic self-sacrifice. I don't have the patience to argue with the brick wall masquerading as your processor." He turned and stalked out of the room.

Optimus sighed heavily and leaned back against the desk, looking after him. It shouldn't be a surprise that the mech was incredibly stubborn. He'd defied the Functionists, after all. But it was disappointing that he was throwing such a fit over not getting his way. Optimus had thought better of him.

An insistence on sending civilians into battle was incomprehensible to him. Surely none of them wanted this. Surely this was Megatron projecting his own desires onto them. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. If Megatron thought this behavior was going to get him his way, he was very wrong. There were some things too important for Optimus to yield on, no matter how fond he was of Megatron himself.

"And who put a dead glitchmouse up *your* tailpipe?"

Megatron glared over his morning energon at Ironhide, who didn't seem concerned, just took a sip of his own energon and raised an optic ridge.

"Does it have anything to do with Starscream's immense sulk regarding you and Optimus?"

"I'd prefer to keep that private," growled Megatron.

"And unfortunately you didn't get that wish," said Ironhide. "It's a small base filled with bored people. You don't get much choice in what becomes grist for the rumor mill."

Megatron grumbled. His mood had been foul since meeting with Optimus the evening before. It had not improved with the knowing looks people were giving him.

"Okay, so it's not just that," said Ironhide, entirely too knowing. "You two have a fight?"

"That is even *less* your business." Megatron tried for even greater hostility and Ironhide didn't seem to notice.

“You definitely had a fight,” the mech said, entirely too pleased with himself.

“That’s enough.” Megatron got up. “I’m finishing this in the medbay.”

“Ratchet will yell at you.”

“Better than you prying.”

Ironhide clicked his glossa and drained his cube. “All else aside, kid, I’m here to talk. Jazz said you might have some things to consult me on. I’m curious to know what they are.”

“Of course he did,” said Megatron. He sat again, watching Ironhide, and frowned even more deeply when Impactor slid into the seat next to him.

He should have just left. “And I suppose he’s with you,” he said to Ironhide.

“Nope,” said Impactor. “Just haven’t seen you so torqued off since you dealt with that shift supervisor. This mech here,” he turned to Ironhide, jerking his thumb at Megatron, “has *the* meanest sense of humor you’ve ever seen. Shift supervisor went after him for his writing. Two days later, shift supervisor’s datapad contents get leaked to the outpost’s intranet. Primus, that mech had some kinks I’d just as rather never see again. And that was *before* the scraplets.”

“It was a single scraplet,” said Megatron. Both incidents had been pure chance. He’d simply taken advantage of it. “And it was dead.”

“Yeah but he didn’t realize that. You should of heard him squeal.” Impactor looked at him. “So, go on. What’s got your panels in a twist?”

Megatron took a long drink of his energon, eying the two of them as he did. “How do you feel about making Starscream look stupid.”

“Sign me the frag up,” said Impactor.

“What he said,” said Ironhide.

“How do you feel about training people how to fight?”

“I’m putting up with you, aren’t I?”

“The refugees want to fight. Optimus and Starscream want them where they are, untrained. Optimus I believe wants to protect them. After Starscream’s comments about wanting them to pull their own weight, however...”

“You’re worried,” said Ironhide. He was frowning now, his good mood gone. “Yeah. Yeah I see what you’re getting at. And you tried to talk to Optimus and got ignored. As everyone does when talking about Starscream.”

“Tell me about it,” growled Impactor. “I’m in. Get to toss a bunch of idiot newbies around? Sure.”

“One of them bit an Enforcer so hard he dented his teeth,” Megatron said. “*Seriously dented* his teeth.”

Ironhide and Impactor knew exactly how much that would have hurt. They looked at each other. Ironhide let out a low whistle. “All right. I’m definitely in. You’d better come too.”

“Why?”

“I need a civilian idiot to toss around a little while demonstrating. They’ll like you better if you’re learning with them.”

Megatron didn’t really like that prospect, but he supposed Ironhide was correct. “Very well.”

“So,” said Impactor, leaning toward Megatron, “now that’s sorted out... Optimus. He treating you all right?”

Megatron made a face and drained his cube. “See you at practice.”

“I’m going to beat the *bolts* off him,” said Impactor, and sounded as if he meant it.

“I think they just had a spat,” said Ironhide.

He wasn’t going to turn around. He wasn’t.

Megatron turned around. “That’s enough discussion of my personal life.”

“Yep, spat,” said Ironhide. “Shoo, kid. Go save some lives, or whatever you do all day.”

Megatron grumbled, and went to the infirmary. But Impactor and Ironhide’s easy ribbing was something he’d missed, and he was glad to have them at his back.

Hot Rod was there, hopping from one foot to another. “Megatron! We just got word from Polyhex, there’s a group of dissidents who need rescuing immediately. Ratchet says he can spare you, and we need a medic. You up?”

“Yes,” said Megatron, without thinking, only wanting to get out of the damn base. “How soon do we leave?”

“Right now,” said Hot Rod. “Come on!” He grinned. “Glad you fixed me up so well, I wouldn’t miss this one for the world.”

Chapter 64

“Hot Rod and Megatron did *what*?”

“Hot Rod talked him into going on a rescue with him,” said First Aid, who seemed to be torn between amusement and concern at Ratchet’s rage.

“Hot Rod only *just* got released,” said Ratchet. “I told him to take it easy! And why the frag is Megatron off risking his on fragging plating again? Why am I surrounded by fragging idiots?”

“Because all young bots are idiots and you’re surrounded by young bots,” said First Aid, perfectly reasonable. “They’ll be all right, Ratchet. Roddy does this all the time, and have *you* ever met anything that actually stopped Megatron in his tracks?”

“He almost died!”

“Note both the past tense and the almost,” said First Aid, completely unruffled. “Hot Rod needed a medic, Ratchet. I would have volunteered but Megatron insisted. He does have field experience.”

“Neither has any sense of self preservation,” said Ratchet.

“And you have such faith that I do?” First Aid twinkled at him, then sobered. “Ratchet, I know you’re worried about him, but you can’t keep him out of harms way forever. He won’t cooperate, for one thing. It’s better that he go off under *someone*’s supervision rather than taking it into his head that he and he alone should do something.”

He was...probably right. It didn’t make it any easier. “If he comes back in anything but perfect condition I’m reformatting both of them into autoclaves,” said Ratchet, and stalked off to his office.

“So,” said Hot Rod, engaged in driving the transport very, very badly, seemingly totally unaware of how Megatron’s fingers were digging dents into the side of the passenger seat, “I should tell you what to expect.”

“Maybe I should drive,” Megatron muttered.

“Nah, I got it,” said Hot Rod, taking a corner too quickly. Megatron would have been willing to bet that all four wheels of the transport had not, in fact, remained on the ground during that maneuver. “Anyway, our contact says about twenty people. They haven’t given us details. For safety—see, if the information about which dissidents might be where is never transmitted, it can’t be intercepted. Simplest solution in case there’s more people out there like Soundwave, which I sincerely hope there aren’t, but paranoia’s only a problem if they’re not out to get you, right?”

“Right,” said Megatron, manually disabling the connection between his gyros and his purge reflex.

“So there’s no knowing where these people have been or what’s happened to them,” said

Hot Rod. “In general, though, expect injuries from interrogation, some combat injuries, and untreated infections and illnesses.”

“Basically what we’ve been seeing in the new arrivals.”

“Yeah. Handler on that end tells me this lot’s pretty bad. So be braced. Not that you need to be braced, really, given that you stabilized me on a fraggin’ battlefield.” They turned onto a long, straight road, with few opportunities for Hot Rod to show off. Megatron vented out and relaxed a little.

Several hours of atrocious driving later, they pulled up next to a badly-lit warehouse. Hot Rod stopped the transport and hopped out. “Hey,” he called. “Bulk Transport Services here, anyone home?”

“Here,” said a voice from the shadows, squeaking a little. “Got a good shipment for you here.” And then, as if he’d finished reading the required script, the mech said, “You’d better make it quick. We’ve got Enforcers on our tail. I think we’re about ten minutes from a firefight.”

“Nothing I’d like better than to hang around and help out,” said Hot Rod, then gestured to Megatron. “But I’ve got one of our medics riding along with me and Primus will my paint get peeled if I get so much as a scratch on him.”

The mech snorted, looked at Megatron, and froze. “Is that--?”

“Yep,” said Hot Rod smugly. “Hope you’re keeping your safehouse in order, Primus himself’s probably keeping an optic on you.”

“Hot Rod,” said Megatron, disapproving. To the other mech, he said, “Hot Rod exaggerates. I’m just here as a medic.”

“Yeah but...” the mech shook his head, then, to Hot Rod, “What the frag were you thinking? You’ve got the most wanted mech on Cybertron and you’re dragging him into this? Surely there are other medics! As soon as the Functionists find out, they’re going to kill him—again!”

“Relax,” said Hot Rod. “We’ll be in and out, and Megatron knows his way around a battlefield. Welded my leg back on under fire, calm as you please.”

“Calm I may be, but time is something we don’t have,” said Megatron. “Let’s get these people out of here.”

“Yeah,” said Hot Rod, and their contact led them to the warehouse doors.

“All right,” he called into the darkness, his voice low and urgent, “the transport’s here. Form a line. We’re going to get you out of here as fast as we can.”

It wasn’t as simple as that, of course. Some of the people were too badly hurt to walk themselves. They were either carried by their fellows, or Megatron went in for them and carried them himself. The group hushed as he walked through them; several times mecha murmured, “I thought you were dead?” or “How are you alive?” and each time he responded with a small tight smile and, “The Functionists did not succeed.”

That heartened them, even the very badly injured ones. Fear was slowly replaced by certainty. “He escaped,” he heard them say, looking at him. “We will too. We will too, with him watching over us.”

That was an entirely unwarranted faith, but Megatron would accept it if it got them out of here faster and more calmly. At least the Functionists hadn't caught up to them.

Which was of course when the Functionists attacked.

The first warning was the sirens, then a blinding spotlight. Hot Rod said something creatively obscene.

Megatron deposited the patient he was carrying with another refugee. "Get him into the transport," he said, and turned.

There were a number of people with military grade alts, including several tanks, and a large transport, probably for prisoners. The spotlight was mounted on that.

"Rebel insurgents," said an amplified voice, "put down your weapons and surrender immediately, or you will be fired upon."

Megatron was surprised they were still taking prisoners. He patted the shoulder of one of the frozen, terrified mecha around him. "It's all right," he said. "I'll take care of this."

He strode forward into the full glare of light. "Do you know me?" he called.

There was a long, telling silence, and faintly he heard frantic whispering from the Functionist lines.

"I said, do you know me? Do you recognize me?" He spread his arms wide. "Surely you do. Surely, you saw what your masters claimed was my death." He grinned. "Clearly, what your masters willed, what they claimed, was against the will of Primus."

He hardly believed in Primus himself, would have some serious words for the god if he existed, but the *Functionists* believed in Primus, and that Primes were His manifestation, the instruments of His divine will. Megatron hadn't stayed alive as long as he had by not taking advantage of things like that. The murmuring grew louder, and took on a panicked edge.

"I am Megatron Prime," he said, continuing to advance. "And you have been deceived. You are *being* deceived. If they lied to you about me, what else did they lie to you about? Did they lie to you about this war? Did they lie to you about *yourselves*? How long have you lived in fear? How long have you lived in denial of what you can be? If a miner can become a medic, if a medic can become Prime, what can you become?"

He was close enough to see their optics now. He met them, one after another. Saw the way hands trembled on weapons.

"What can you become? Your bodies are prisons only because of the people you serve. Your bodies are prisons only within this system. There is a way out. There is a way to freedom." He extended a hand to them. "Follow me, and find out."

Which was when the first of them shot at him.

He was ready. He had a shield generator and a sidearm. The shield generator, locked to his arm, flared into being a second before the blaster bolt hit, splashing it harmlessly. He raised the sidearm and returned fire. There was a scream as the mech responsible went down.

"Join me!" he shouted. "Join me, or perish here, for these people are under my protection!"

They didn't seem interested. Weapons fire rained down around him; for a time he had to crouch there with shield upraised until Hot Rod and his friend managed enough suppressing fire to let him get off a few shots of his own. He should have retreated then, but it didn't seem right. He extended his sword and charged the line.

Fighting felt *good*. Even though he *knew* he shouldn't be doing it, that it was incredibly stupid, he still charged and he loved it. And to his absolute delight, few of these mecha were anywhere near as skilled as Ironhide.

"Get out of there!" screamed Hot Rod. "Megatron Prime, get your aft back in here and take care of your fragging patients!"

He didn't want to—there was something too viscerally satisfying in battle—but he did. He disengaged and stumbled back, hunched behind his shield and his armor stinging where glancing shots had singed him, and retreated.

So did the Functionists. He'd managed to make a serious dent in their lines, and there was a caution in the way they huddled back.

"Wow you're even dumber than I am," said Hot Rod. "Climb in, your patients need you," and he hopped up into the drivers seat. "Hey you, whoever you are, get your aft in here too."

Their contact hurried to obey. Megatron jumped in the back and slammed the doors, mentally resigning himself to several more hours of Hot Rod's driving.

He looked at the other mecha packed into the transport. They stared back at him with wide optics, and when he told them to show him the most gravely injured, they did so without question.

As he worked, and tried not to get thrown around, he thought back on fighting those Functionists. About how good it had felt. He smiled a little to himself.

He'd have to make sure to do that again.

The call came deep in the night. Starscream rolled over and slapped the communicator on. "What?" he snapped.

"I'm told you're looking to address the Senate," said the voice on the other end of the line. *"How does in three days time sound to you?"*

Starscream smiled to himself in the dark. "In three days time sounds just fine," he said, and waited for the comm to click dead before he transformed out his nullray, staring at the glow of charged lights along the length of it.

"Yes," he said into the dark. "Just fine."

Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for a sexual assault in this chapter.

Jazz stood and watched the training, surprised and pleased. Megatron worked fast. He'd found them not one but two instructors, and both of them were good. Of course, Jazz would expect no less from Ironhide, but Impactor he barely knew.

And there was a lot of interest in the training. Easily a quarter of the refugees were there, and there were a lot of people hanging around the edges, watching with wary interest. When the two huge instructors entirely failed to removed anyone's limbs, a few of them joined in. By their faces, Jazz was pretty sure more would follow.

Too bad Megatron had gone off on that little jaunt with Hot Rod. Which they should be returning from any time now...

As if on cue, there was a commotion at what had been the loading dock of the old factory. People stopped practicing and turned to stare at the loading bay doors; the area they'd taken over for practice was the arrival and assembly area.

One door creaked upward, and Hot Rod walked in. He threw the key for the transport to Jazz, who caught it one handed, and said, "Okay but our fragging Prime is a glorious fragging moron, and it's his own damn fault," and stalked past.

Jazz wasn't happy to hear that.

He looked at Prowl, who looked just about as unhappy, and they moved forward as one.

Megatron, thank Primus, was the next out of the truck, with a mech leaning heavily on him. Immediately, Jazz saw what Hot Rod had been referring to, and froze, because Megatron was covered in minor singes and looked as if he'd been fighting.

"What did you do?" he said.

"Attempted to convert a number of reluctant Functionists," said Megatron. "Unfortunately, they were not amenable to my offer."

"He faced down an entire squadron and a tank!" said the mech he was supporting, gleefully. "With only a *shield*."

"I had a sidearm," said Megatron to Jazz, as if that would make Jazz feel any better.

"Yeah," said Jazz at last. "Yeah, you're a fragging idiot."

Megatron gave him a smile he could only describe as cheeky and far more attractive than it had any right to be. "Do we have a place we can set up as a medical bay?"

Silently, Jazz led the way.

Well, at least the response from Ratchet would be spectacular.

Every time he went out of the base, he ended up getting yelled at. Megatron huffed a deep vent of irritation. Jazz had been a surprise. Ratchet had not. Now, he was sitting in Optimus's office and also getting shouted at.

"You're not disposable!" Optimus was saying. "You're the Prime, Megatron! You must start acting like it! People rely on you. I rely on you, Ratchet relies on you. We don't have time for stupid heroics. We can't lose you again."

"For the last time, I'm fine," said Megatron. "Mildly singed, but fine. And no, I'm not going to sit around and pretend to be the infallible Prime. *No one* is disposable, Optimus. I'm here to do what I can with my skills and with my spark. Why should I risk myself any less than any of them?"

Optimus sighed, exasperated, and prodded him hard in the chestplates. "That. We lost you once, Megatron, and by losing you, we lost our way. You are the spark of our cause."

Megatron whacked his hand aside with a frown. "And you spend a lot of time ignoring the counsel of your spark, do you?"

Optimus withdrew, looking hurt. "Megatron..."

"No. You don't get to look pathetic at me," said Megatron. "You haven't listened to me about the refugees. You've been ignoring them, and listening to Starscream and Starscream alone. Not Prowl. Not Jazz. What the frag do you think you're doing, Optimus?"

He seemed to have finally gotten under Optimus's plating. "I'm keeping everyone safe," he snapped. "I know how to do that, Megatron. I was an Enforcer. That was our *job*. Your spark's in the right place, but you don't know what you're dealing with."

Megatron got to his feet. "Oh, it was your job, was it? Then where were you when the Functionists stripped my brain module? Oh. I remember. Your kind fragging held me down."

"Megatron, that's not fair--,"

"No. I'll tell you what's not fair." Megatron stabbed a finger in the direction of the refugee camp. "Leaving those people defenseless. Oh, you're fine having them do all the tasks you and your big bold warriors are too important to do, but not learn to defend themselves? Do you know what happens when you have a whole section of the population unable to defend themselves and doing all the jobs the rest of it won't? With no ability to move between the two? Oh, no. You don't. Because you were an *Enforcer*."

"Megatron," said Optimus, quelling. "You're tired. You're over—"

"No. No. You're not ending this there." Megatron stepped close. They were of a height, and he glared into the other mech's optics. "You give the refugees the opportunity to learn to defend themselves and to become full-fledged Decepticons."

Optimus's optics narrowed. "Are you threatening me?"

Megatron gave him a smile that showed a lot of fang. “Do I need to?”

Optimus glared at him a few moments longer, then turned away with a heavy sigh. “If you want to lead, you will need to dispense with the dramatics,” he said. “Give me good reasons to consider the refugees—not reasons based out of your own fears—and show me that they can undertake the duties they’d need to, and I’ll consider it. But I won’t give you special dispensation. Not because—”

“We’re fragging? Fragging’s hardly a reason to ignore me, Optimus.”

“I’m not ignoring you. Your proposal is foolish. It will get the people you’re trying to protect killed. I won’t let you do that.”

“Your plan will put them in a lot more danger,” Megatron said.

Optimus sighed heavily and turned away, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We’ll have to agree to disagree.”

“Not on this we won’t,” said Megatron. “It’s too important.”

“Can we get back to the subject at hand?”

“No. As I recall, you were shouting at me for risking myself.” Megatron folded his arms over his chest. “Tell me, Optimus, is that because I’m Prime...or because, to you, I’m another civilian.”

“You were a miner. Now a medic. Now Prime,” said Optimus, not looking at him. “You *are* a civilian, Megatron, and you deserve to be safe. After all you’ve sacrificed, you deserve to be safe.”

“I don’t want to,” said Megatron. “Are you going to respect my ability to choose, or continue to coddle me against my will? Is this what you propose to do with all of Cybertron? Tell me, Optimus, what do you see in our future?”

“Our...”

“The Cybertronian people.” Megatron waved an irritated hand. “Not the two of us. Clearly, *we’re* a disaster.”

“I thought...elections, once things were stabilized.”

“And before?”

Now Optimus did look uncomfortable.

“You’d rule,” said Megatron. “With your command staff to advise you. But you don’t listen to me. You don’t listen to Jazz. You listen to Starscream. So you and Starscream. And there’s always going to be something wrong. Some excuse not to surrender power. Do you really think those will stop? Do you really think you’ll do it? Because right now, watching you? Having this stupid fragging argument? I’m doubting that. How do I know you won’t just install a new regime that looks exactly like the Functionists, except with a Decepticon emblem slapped on it? That’s not what I gave my fragging brain for, Optimus. That’s not what I sacrificed my very *self* for. You took my cause and you’re perverting it. And this is me telling you what you’re doing, and you can either fragging listen or—”

“Or what?” said Optimus, very calmly.

Megatron searched for a good answer to that, but his rage had run past his plans, past his ability to *do* anything about it. He stood, silent.

“I’m doing my best. All of us,” Optimus gestured to the base, “are doing our best, Megatron. Just because things aren’t perfect doesn’t mean we’re all malicious.”

“Then listen to my suggestions,” said Megatron, and stalked out.

Ratchet was working late. It had been a while since he’d seen the need. Megatron and First Aid made a powerful team, and First Aid and Ambulon were getting along just fine. Pharma too, was doing well.

But sometimes, things came up. Like tonight. It wasn’t a bad change of pace; entering patient information and getting a database set up for the refugees wasn’t the worst thing. Maybe it could wait. But it was simple work. He enjoyed it.

There was a small click as a cube was put down in front of him. “You’ve been working on that for the last eight hours,” Pharma said. “It’s late. You should sleep, Ratchet.”

“Mmm,” said Ratchet, and kept working. After a while, he added, “Thank you, Pharma.”

“Come on Ratchet, there’s no one here. We can lock the doors.” Pharma heaved himself up onto the desk and perched there, smiling down at him. “Actually, I already locked the doors so we could have a little privacy. Just like old times.”

“I don’t want old times,” said Ratchet. “I have work to do, Pharma. Thanks for the energon. You get some rest—I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I didn’t bring you energon so you could ignore me,” said Pharma. He leaned forward and grabbed Ratchet’s chin, turning his head so he had to meet his optics. “I brought you energon so we could do this.” And he kissed Ratchet, hard, tongue shoving into his mouth.

Ratchet’s optics went wide and he shoved desperately at Pharma’s plating. It did no good. Pharma slipped down off the desk to straddle Ratchet’s lap, pinning him in the chair.

“Stop,” said Ratchet, a weak sound. Pharma’s panel ground against his. “Pharma, no, I don’t want this.”

Pharma just laughed at him. “You *think* you don’t want this,” he said. “We’re conjunx, Ratchet. You’ve just forgotten.”

The doors were locked. His comm was out of reach. It sat there on his desk, just in view, out of reach, taunting him. There were no patients here right now; the little group Megatron had rescued was with the refugees. Ratchet wanted to berate himself for his stupidity in allowing himself to be caught like this. For working alone. He wanted to shove Pharma off. But he found himself frozen, looking up at the mech who’d once been his mate. There was a hardness to Pharma’s optics. He might be speaking sweet platitudes right now, but he knew he was hurting Ratchet. That was why he was doing this.

He wasn't going to get out of this. Pharma's horror at his tears in the depths of the factory had been a one-time thing. No one would hear him if he screamed for help.

Pharma's weight on him was inescapable. He knew what he was doing, Ratchet realized. He always knew what he was doing. Watching Ratchet freeze up like this—he thought it was fun. Maybe even arousing. He was reveling in his power, savoring it.

“You're going to feel so good tonight,” Pharma promised.

“Please stop,” Ratchet managed, but was silenced as Pharma's mouth closed over his once more. Pharma didn't seem to mind Ratchet sitting still as a corpse under him, Ratchet as he stared blankly past his cheek, processor whirling, small panicked loops of thought forming and ending on themselves, his very spark feeling like it was trying to crawl from his chassis.

He wasn't going to get out of this.

Ratchet shuddered, hard, optics focused on the comm, and tried to endure.

Chapter 66

“Where’s Ratchet?”

First Aid looked up at Megatron, visor bright. “Aren’t you his roommate?” he asked, sounding worried. One of the reasons Megatron liked the mech. “Did he not come home last night?”

“He didn’t,” said Megatron. “I haven’t seen him since we refueled last night.”

“I haven’t seen him since my shift ended,” said First Aid, getting to his feet. “Hey Ambulon? Megatron and I have to do something—can you hold the fort for ten minutes until Pharma gets in?”

“Ugh,” said Ambulon, face screwing up with distaste at the mention of Pharma. “Yeah. Should I redirect emergencies to him, too?”

“If you’d be so kind,” said First Aid, visor flickering in a smile. “Come on, Megatron. Let’s see where he’s gone.”

On a hunch, they checked the supply closets first. Nothing. The mess. The training rooms. Their quarters. The places in the base itself that a mech might go seeking solitude. Nothing.

A low-grade panic curled in Megatron’s spark. Was this Starscream’s doing? Had he taken his revenge for their earlier interaction? He’d warned Starscream that if any harm came to his friends, he’d kill Starscream. Had that not been enough?

“One more place,” he said aloud to First Aid.

First Aid’s comm warbled. He grabbed it. “Aid here,” he said, and then flinched, holding it away from his audial. Even from several paces away, Megatron could hear Pharma’s voice.

“He wants us back in the medbay,” said First Aid, apologetic and unnecessarily.

“If you have to go, go,” said Megatron. “But unless he knows where Ratchet is, I’m not listening to him.”

First Aid hesitated.

“You don’t want him thinking you’re taking someone else’s side,” Megatron reminded gently.

“Yeah I know how he gets,” said First Aid. “Thing is, he’s gotten that way anyway. Primus knows why.”

“It might be something to do with Ratchet,” said Megatron.

“It’s usually something to do with Ratchet,” said First Aid, grimly. “You saw one side of that. I saw the other. Neither’s pretty.”

Megatron led him to the door connecting the facilities, base to refugee camp, and waited until it had closed behind them before he said, “How long was it before you realized what Pharma was doing to Ratchet?”

“It was a while. I didn’t see them interact. I didn’t see the effects. I knew Pharma was nasty enough—Primus, the slag he says to his apprentices!—but I’d always assumed that Ratchet was...” he trailed off, visor dim, and then said, “...good enough. Unlike us. That he *did* reach Pharma’s unrealistic standards of perfection, the perfection we *have* to attain or people die.” He huffed a heavy vent. “And then after you—after you fell, I saw Ratchet around more and realized that wasn’t just grief. I watched Pharma with him and I didn’t like it. So I got suspicious.” He glanced at Megatron. “You?”

“I overheard some conversations,” said Megatron. “I didn’t like them. And then he showed up at the clinic with a broken nose and refusing to go home.”

First Aid hissed a quiet vent. “We shouldn’t have left him alone,” he said.

“Pharma was playing nice,” said Megatron. “That should have alerted me, at least. But it didn’t. I shouldn’t have let him request me as an assistant.”

“Ratchet ordered you to go,” said First Aid.

Megatron sighed heavily and kept walking.

They were down the stairs and halfway across the refugee camp when Prowl found them. “Megatron,” he said. “First Aid. Do you know of anything unusual happening with Ratchet in the last day or so?”

“He’s here?” said Megatron.

Prowl nodded curtly. “He’s using one of the datastations. Says he has work to do.” He looked sidelong and up at Megatron. “But he doesn’t sound, or act, normal to me. There’s something off. Please find out what it is. There are few enough of you...”

“And he’s the best,” said Megatron bluntly. “Where is he?”

There was a little cluster of administrative offices—really, small squares cordoned off with tarps, workstations wired into hastily-spliced power cables. They weren’t very busy. They got significantly less busy at a muttered order from Prowl.

Ratchet stood at one. He was well- and recently-cleaned, but he hadn’t applied any wax. Unusual for him. And he didn’t look up as Megatron and the others approached, which was normal, but there was a wary stiffness to his posture that wasn’t.

“Good morning,” said Megatron carefully.

“What are you here for,” said Ratchet, not a question but a demand.

Megatron had dealt with Ratchet in a variety of moods. This one was making his plating stand on end. He carefully brought it closer into his body, something more neutral. It didn’t feel right, but the servos would have started to ache otherwise. “I wanted to check on your welfare,” he said. “I didn’t see you return last night.”

“Didn’t realize you’d become my guardian,” said Ratchet. “And since when do you need an

entourage?”

“They joined me of their own accord,” said Megatron, calmly. He took a few more steps forward.

Ratchet’s hands were shaking on the console.

“First Aid,” said Megatron, “Prowl, could you give us a few moments?”

Both obediently retreated. Megatron knelt so he was a little below Ratchet’s level. “Ratchet. I’m worried.”

“Of course you’re worried,” said Ratchet. “You’re always worried. About everyone except yourself. I’m tired of you prying, Megatron. Leave me in peace. It’s not like you have trouble abandoning me.”

It stung. Megatron settled back, blinking with surprise, because that sort of petty viciousness was not Ratchet’s usual behavior.

“Something happened,” he said flatly. He refused to be impressed by this. “You don’t have to talk about it, but something happened.”

“Oh, *something happened*,” said Ratchet, mocking. “But you were too busy with Optimus, weren’t you.”

“Mostly shouting,” said Megatron mildly, and settled into a sitting position, looking up at his mentor. “Ratchet, we trust you. What do I need to do to help you?”

“Frag off,” said Ratchet.

“Original.” Megatron settled himself better. “We do need our best medic back on the job.”

“No, you need me to keep holding your hand,” snarled Ratchet, and finally actually looked at him. Megatron held himself very still; the pain in the other mech’s eyes was horrible to see. This made more sense; Ratchet’s rage was that of a cornered turbofox. He didn’t want this conversation, but he needed it, and he knew he needed it, and his rage at the conflict was what he was snarling in Megatron’s face now.

“Was it Pharma?” Megatron said softly.

The collapse was terrible to watch. Ratchet turned back to the console. His hands were shaking too badly to type. He brought them up and stared at them, then put his face in them and sobbed. His knees crumpled under him, and it was only Megatron’s steadying hands that kept him from collapsing entirely. He leaned against Megatron, still sobbing hard, shaking even harder. He was trying to talk and Megatron couldn’t make out what he was saying. Megatron very cautiously patted him on the back.

“I’m sorry,” he said once, and then again and again as his mentor sobbed helplessly into his chest. It felt like it should have been unthinkable. Back in the clinic, back at the Academy, Ratchet had been the center of his world, a protective force stronger than anything else. That armor had cracked again and again, but Megatron still found himself remarkably dismayed for his own sake, deeply disturbed at the fact of Ratchet’s collapse as well as the misery in the other mech’s frame. “I’m sorry, Ratchet. I should have been there. I’m sorry.”

Much later, hiccupping, Ratchet said, “I don’t understand. It’s not the first time—just...just

I thought...I didn't think he'd try again."

"Let me know what you want," said Megatron as gently as he could, with rage sparking through his lines. He thought he knew what Ratchet was implying and he felt his spark shrink from the very idea, even as he wondered how fragging stupid he'd been not to see it as a risk. "Let me know what you want, when you know what it is."

"I'm staying here," said Ratchet. "I'm staying here and I'm not going back and I'm not trying to convince Optimus about it and—I'm staying here."

"You'll stay here," said Megatron. "You're needed here, too. The refugees will need a dedicated medic. They couldn't ask for anyone better than you."

"Not like this," said Ratchet, bitterly.

"I'll spend as much time here as I can. You don't have to do this alone." Megatron huffed out a long vent. "Do you want the conjunx ritus annulled?"

"I do," said Ratchet, "but if he doesn't...an annulment would have to go through the courts, and how would we do that?"

Megatron frowned down at his hands. "I'll consult Prowl, if that's all right with you. He might have an alternative."

"I suppose so," said Ratchet. He sounded far from enthusiastic.

Megatron resolved to make sure an annulment was unnecessary. If Pharma was dead, it'd be done with even more neatly. "Only if you want me to."

"It's not like I haven't already made enough of a spectacle of myself." Ratchet hunched down over himself, mouth pulling tight.

"You had every right to make much more of a spectacle of yourself," said Megatron, as gently as he could. "You don't have to handle everything with perfect poise, Ratchet. You don't have to be perfect. Not at a time like this. Can you stand?"

Ratchet nodded shakily, and let Megatron draw him gently to his feet again. They stepped away from the console. Prowl, who'd probably been listening in, materialized next to them. "I took the liberty of having another set of living quarters prepared," he said. To Ratchet, "I'm afraid it's primitive, but you'll have a recharge slab and some sort of privacy. I'll get a dedicated medical bay started for you, though our facilities will be primitive."

"I can work with primitive," said Ratchet.

"I'm happy to show you around if you so desire," said Prowl. Ratchet looked at Megatron.

"I'll help you get settled in," said Megatron, as firmly as he could. "Then I'll go back and get things settled back in the base. You won't have to worry about them."

Ratchet nodded jerkily. He didn't thank either of them, but Megatron hadn't expected thanks. Right now, their focus needed to be on keeping him safe.

Several hours later, Megatron stalked back to the base. Now, with Ratchet ensconced in the refugee camp, what remained was dealing with the fallout.

Megatron had a very clear idea of what that fallout ought to include. If Pharma saw another day, he was going to be a remarkably lucky mech. Megatron was going to make certain that he wasn't going to hurt Ratchet ever again.

He would give Optimus a single chance to clean house. To get rid of Pharma for once and for all. If he cared as much about Ratchet as he claimed to, it should be an easy decision. Yet, Megatron had no faith that Optimus would follow through. Optimus was too loyal to individuals. They couldn't afford that right now. Not with Pharma and Starscream.

Megatron growled to himself, hands clenching. If Optimus wouldn't deal with Pharma, he would. And his way of dealing with Pharma would be far more final. He almost hoped Optimus would brush him aside...

"Got something on your mind?"

Megatron spun, grabbing at thin air as Jazz darted back.

"Your reflexes are getting better," Jazz said with a grin. "Sorry. Should have expected you were wound tight."

"Yes," said Megatron. "And you know why, I'm sure."

"Yeah." Jazz came cautiously back into range. "I do. What are you planning?"

"Should I tell you that?"

Jazz laughed. There was no humor in it, and his expression was cold and calculating. "I think so. I'm probably planning to help."

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes. I spoke to Pharma once before about Ratchet. I have little tolerance for seeing my instructions ignored."

"Good for you," said Megatron, without any real approval.

"Do you think I didn't put it together?" said Jazz. "When I asked him if I needed to extract Pharma as well from the Functionists, he hesitated. Do you know how unusual that is for him? He'd save a stranger from them without a second thought. But when Pharma was mentioned, he *hesitated*. That told me all I needed to know. Didn't even need to see Pharma in action to confirm it."

"So it's been an open secret," said Megatron. "And none of you did anything?"

Jazz took a small step back, doorwings flattening. Megatron could have pulled his rage back, but he didn't want to. He stared at Jazz, flat and merciless. How could Jazz have simply let Pharma do as he pleased for so long? How could he have turned a blind eye? There was entirely too fragging much of that around here, and now Ratchet had suffered for it.

It would end *now*.

"I did," Jazz said. "But it wasn't enough. I made it very clear to Pharma that he was going

to come down with a bad case of being real dead if he went near Ratchet. The few times after that I saw them interact, it was perfectly professional. I got distracted by Starscream. I should have left someone to watch over them. That was a mistake, a mistake I'll own. But Pharma knew there were consequences to that. Pharma disregarded them, and I really want to know *why*."

Megatron eyed him suspiciously, not sure if he believed him. If Jazz was trying to appease him to save his own spark. At last, he said, "I would like to know that as well."

He had few enough allies just now. Jazz was likely one of them. And with Pharma so willing to do something potentially suicidal to please himself, he wasn't willing to sacrifice any of them. There was something ugly here. And he needed to be careful.

He didn't want to be careful. He wanted to tear the entire base down around their audials for letting this happen. Because he was certain that, if Pharma was getting away with this, other people were probably getting away with worse.

"I'll do my best to find out," said Jazz. "That, I promise."

"Thank you."

"And what are you planning?"

"I'll speak to Optimus," said Megatron. "We'll see if something can be done about Pharma. I'll give him one chance."

"Don't bother," said Jazz. "I already did. Repeatedly. And he's repeatedly refused to believe me."

Megatron growled to himself. The memory of Ratchet's broken nasal ridge, his cracked optic, played in his mind, and he wished he'd been more himself then. That he had done something.

"I see," he said aloud, and it sounded like a threat even to his own audials.

Jazz stopped him with an outstretched hand. "No," he said.

"No?" said Megatron. "To what?"

"You're going to kill him." Jazz met Megatron's optics. "Don't lie. I know what happened to Overlord. Pharma is different. You can't hide Pharma the same way—*everyone* wanted Overlord dead, and no one thought of you. That was good. But it won't be the same here."

"I'm not letting him touch Ratchet again."

"Of course not. Let me take care of it."

Megatron stared at him, silent. Jazz gave him a quick, cocky grin that faded almost instantly.

"I told Pharma he'd die if he touched Ratchet again," he said. "I'm trained for this, Megatron. Let me do it. You have to remain above it. This can't touch you, do you understand me? Things are explosive enough."

Jazz was right. Jazz was right, but Megatron hated it. He managed a jerky nod.

"I won't let you down," said Jazz, chipper as if this actually made him happy, gave him a

two-fingered salute, and flipped back up out of sight.

“I think I should still speak with Optimus,” said Megatron to the ceiling. “He cannot deny it if it comes from two of us.”

“He’ll try,” said Jazz’s voice, echoing. “But you might as well. Plausible deniability, and all that.”

“That too,” said Megatron, and resumed his course back to the base.

Above him, Jazz laughed. This was amused. “I like the way you think, mech. I like the way you think *a lot*.”

Megatron smiled a little to himself.

Funnily enough, the conversation with Jazz did make him feel a great deal better. They were doing *something*. And whatever Optimus said, Pharma would be taken care of.

That, he could live with.

He found Optimus in his office once again, bending over a map with Starscream. He walked in without hesitating and joined them, watching Starscream draw lines and arrows on the map with a deft, confident hand.

Starscream wasn’t a bad tactician, he realized, dipping briefly into the Matrix and its experiences. What he was doing wasn’t traditional, and it made a sort of sense once Megatron stared hard at the map and let the matrix look at it through him.

“What do you want,” said Starscream, barely glancing at him. “You’re on duty in the medbay.”

Optimus raised his head to look at Megatron. “Are you all right?”

“May I have a moment?” said Megatron. “It’s about personnel.”

“Any reason that personnel matter can’t wait an hour?” said Starscream. “We’re busy. *You* should be busy, patching people up and patting them on the helm. That’s what you’re best at, isn’t it?”

“Starscream,” said Optimus, reproving.

“He’s away from his post,” Starscream pointed out. “And I can’t see why you should be involved in this and I shouldn’t. Aren’t I your second in command?”

“Optimus,” said Megatron. “It is urgent. And I have to respect medical privacy.”

Optimus hesitated. Then, “Starscream, please give me a few minutes. I’m sure this won’t take long.”

“Of course you’re sure,” sneered Starscream. He turned on a thruster and strode out the door, wings stiff with anger.

“It’s Ratchet,” said Megatron quickly.

That got Optimus’s full attention at last. “What happened?”

“Do you remember when he arrived at the clinic with a broken nasal ridge and shattered optic?” said Megatron.

“I do,” said Optimus.

“That wasn’t a mugging. It was Pharma.”

Optimus stared at him, silent, wide-opticked.

“Something happened today. It was bad. Ratchet’s requested to be relocated to the refugee camp for the immediate future.” Megatron met Optimus’s startled horror with a steady gaze. “I am requesting that Pharma be dismissed.”

“Primus.” Optimus leaned heavily against the strategy table, hand smearing the map. “What happened?”

“Something bad,” Megatron repeated. “Judging from Ratchet’s reaction.”

Optimus passed a hand over his face. “Do you have anything but his reaction?”

“A comment. He was surprised that Pharma did—whatever it was he did.” Optimus wasn’t meeting his optics. A steely rage built in Megatron’s spark. “He’s intensely private, Optimus. He’s not going to make a big announcement about this. If he won’t talk to me about it...”

“If he won’t talk to you about it, if there’s no evidence other than his reaction...” Optimus sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, Megatron. It’s not enough. Get me concrete proof, and I can do something. But Pharma is important—you know as well as I do we’re short on medics, and Starscream speaks highly of him. I’d owe Starscream an explanation. I’d owe our troops an explanation.”

“You owe Starscream *nothing*,” snapped Megatron, and the hurt look Optimus gave him only made him angrier. “I’m telling you that Ratchet was—hurt and you’re turning it into a PR tragedy? I thought you were his friend.”

“I am his friend!” said Optimus. “But I can’t be judge, jury, and executioner. None of us have that right, Megatron. I need evidence before I eject Pharma. With as many enemies as he has, it would be a death sentence. And whatever he’s done, he deserves fairness.”

Megatron stared at him, then huffed out a long vent. “I should have known better,” he said bitterly. “You’re talking about fairness, Optimus. You’re talking about doing the right thing. But sometimes, the only way the real right thing can get done is if you’re willing to get your hands dirty.”

“I won’t believe that,” said Optimus. “I cannot.”

“I’m sorry, have I mistaken you for another mech? Didn’t you happily step into Overlord’s place?”

“More people would have died if I hadn’t.”

“My point exactly.”

“This is completely different.”

“Yes, it is.” Megatron laid his palms flat on the table and leaned in. “Because this time, it’s a Pit of a lot clearer what the right thing is, and you’re too bewitched by Starscream to do it.”

He pushed away and stalked out.

At least he had Jazz.

Finding Pharma was gratifyingly easy. Dumbaft was trying to find Ratchet, and had finally decided he might try the refugee camp.

Jazz had no objections. It meant Pharma was alone in the old recycling plant that connected the facilities. His proximity sensors were detecting nobody at all in the massive dim space. It was even a plausible cause of death. Pharma could have slipped and fallen, damaging a wing or thruster on the way down.

Jazz scanned the area one more time. Nothing. He slipped down from the rafters, moving quickly and silently. Oh, certainly, flightframes were masters of the air—but give him enough things to grab and space to maneuver, and Jazz could outpace any three flyers you cared to name in terrain like this.

He landed lightly behind Pharma, and savored the expression on the mech’s face as he stood. He was far smaller, but Pharma was scared of him and right now, with the memory of Ratchet’s face clear in his processor, that *mattered*.

“I think we had an agreement,” he said pleasantly, walking forward. “You stay away from Ratchet. You don’t hurt him. And I restrain my desire to hurt *you*.”

“I did nothing!” said Pharma, raising his hands. It was such a poor attempt at bluster that Jazz laughed aloud.

“I’m a better liar than you, mech.” He moved in close. “Bet you’re used to fooling everyone, huh? No one looks past your achievements. You’re a brilliant medic. Of course you’d never do anything like rape your conjunx.”

“You’re insane,” said Pharma. “I’d never—”

Jazz clicked his glossa. “Save your vocalizer, doctor. No one here’s going to believe you. I know you hurt him. And so what if I’m guessing about how, *this time*? I think I’m right. And if I’m wrong, you still hurt him and bad. And that still breaks our agreement.”

Pharma’s face twisted. He hunched and fired one of his shoulder missiles. Jazz ducked out of the way.

“Nice try,” he said. “My turn.”

He seized the other missile and twisted it out of its mount, throwing it over the edge of the catwalk. He struck the same points on Pharma as he had earlier. Pharma went limp, and Jazz seized him and threw him over the edge of the railing.

“Good riddance,” he started to say, and was cut off by the scream of jet engines.

Starscream rose into view, Pharma in his arms. “So Megatron wants to play this way, does he?” he said, and put Pharma down. Pharma, just recovering his motor functions again, clung to the grating of the catwalk and shook. “He wants to make my people targets, does he?”

He landed, and stalked toward Jazz. Jazz knew when he was outmatched. He turned and ran, throwing himself into thin air, reaching for a beam.

Starscream slammed into him, carrying him over and down and onto another walkway. Jazz’s ventilations whooshed out of him. He raised his hands in a vain attempt to shield himself.

Starscream’s claws tore into his abdomen. Jazz curled up despite the pain, caught Starscream in the midsection with a kick, and forced himself upright, yanking a small curved knife out of subspace. “Don’t go down that easy, Screamer. Megs has got nothin’ to do with this. Pharma torqued me off is all.”

“Liar,” said Starscream, pleasantly enough, and attacked.

Jazz eluded the first blow, but Starscream kicked his legs out from under him. The stabbing pain in his abdomen got worse, like something had torn. Jazz slashed at Starscream’s face with the knife, missed and caught a shoulder instead. Starscream snarled into his face and slammed their helmets together. Jazz’s audials rang, and sharp pain exploded under his bumper as Starscream’s claws dug into his chest again, ripping.

He writhed to one side and bit hard. Starscream yelped. Jazz jammed the knife in the crook of an elbow, but Starscream pulled away, yanking the knife out of Jazz’s fingers. He kicked Jazz hard in the midsection, and Jazz heard himself make a horrible wheezing gasp.

There was—there was a lot of pain. A horrible flooding weakness. He was leaking fast. He’d already lost a lot of energon; it splashed pink all around him, glowing bright in the warm darkness of the plant. It seemed a lot less warm. Moving seemed difficult.

Starscream kicked him in the face. Jazz felt his nasal ridge go, blinding pain and a crunch. Probably lost some dentae. Another kick. The wound under his bumper, the wound near his spark, grew. He rolled to his back, trying to get up, and a thruster came down on one hand and ignited.

He screamed. Heard it turn into a wavering shriek and something like a sob, and curled up over the mangled hand. They weren’t quite medic hands but they were close, and the pain eclipsed even that in his chest.

Starscream was on top of him. When had that happened? Starscream was on top of him and he was ripping, tearing at his armor. Claws hooked into the seams of his chestplates and wrenched, and Jazz made a sound of utter horror as he saw his own sparklight reflected on Starscream’s face.

“You don’t deserve to die fast,” said Starscream, staring down at him, and reached in and did something. Jazz made a noise like a wail, the pain secondary to the horror of dampness and cold deep in his frame. “But he won’t find you in time. No one will find you in time.”

He stood, Jazz’s energon glowing on his claws and chest and face, around his savage grin, and then hesitated, leaning in.

“These don’t come standard with Intelligence builds,” he said, and tapped Jazz’s visor.

Jazz bared his teeth at him. “Frag off,” he managed.

Starscream's grin grew, and he reached down, grabbed the visor and wrenched. It snapped in his hands.

Jazz screamed again, the world blurring into a confusion of dimness and darkness and the glowing pink of energon.

"Pharma needs medical attention," said Starscream. "Then I'll come back and check on you. Give you a kick into one of those smelting pits, if I can be bothered. Word of advice? Try to leak out before then. I don't think I'm inclined to make sure you're offline for that." He ignited his jets. "After all, you weren't exactly going to do that for Pharma, now were you?"

Jazz tried to grope in his chest, tried to find the lines that were leaking. They were going too fast. He couldn't get a grip on them, and his remaining hand wouldn't stop shaking. There was too much.

Far, far too much.

He knew what a fatal wound looked like. Felt like.

His vision—what was left of it, with the visor gone, Primus, that'd be a mess to repair even if he lived—was getting darker. He reached for all his survival systems, everything to constrict energon flow, everything to reroute power, without much hope it would do enough. But it was instinct. It was better than nothing.

His remaining hand slipped from his chest. He felt damp around his spark. He shuddered in disgust and terror. He'd almost been snuffed once, open sparkchamber, rising liquid on an organic planet, and that instinctive horror overcame his spinning processor.

"Prowl," he said aloud, half a plea, half an apology, staring up at the network of catwalks above him. What he supposed were a network of catwalks. It was darkness.

There was less pain now. A lot less. He closed his optics, felt his shivering fading. Felt his frame hitching with desperate useless ventilations, but it seemed to matter less. The world seemed to tilt, to swing, and he was sinking.

And then there was nothing.

Chapter 67

Megatron was just returning from refueling to get Ratchet's things from the medbay and their quarters when he ran into Starscream in the corridor.

"Just the mech I wanted to see," purred Starscream. "Megatron, I thought we had an agreement. We behave." He stalked past, palming something sharp into Megatron's hand, and leaned close. "You don't touch my subordinates... and I don't kill your friends."

He was gone before Megatron could respond. He brought his hand up and looked at what was in it.

The shards of a shattered visor. Jazz's visor.

Megatron looked at it for half a moment and turned and ran for the door that connected to the old recycling center. If Jazz were anywhere else, someone would have found his frame by now. And he owed it to him at least to retrieve him.

Frag. Frag—he shouldn't have underestimated Starscream. He shouldn't have assumed.... But he had, and Jazz was dead, Starscream's words implied as much.

There was energon halfway between the two facilities, a dim pink glow far below. Megatron scrambled down what seemed like a never-ending maze of ladders and poles and catwalks, moving as quickly as he could, feeling far too big for the space, far too aware of the glow of smelting pools far below. There, there energon was dripping into one, goutts of flame rising from the surface of the pool as it got near enough to combust. Someone was there. Someone badly hurt. There was too much energon. The small medical kit he carried wouldn't be enough.

It was Jazz. His chest was torn open, and Megatron stopped for a moment with shock and wonder, because there was still sparklight flickering from the wound. He knelt behind the still frame, pulling out his pitiful small medical kit, and started working.

It was half butcher job, half surgical precision. He guessed that maybe Starscream had disabled Jazz, kept him from fighting back, and then done the rest of it. He hadn't meant to kill him quickly, the strokes of each cut said that much, and the fact he'd left the sparkchamber alone.

Megatron worked as fast as he dared. It wasn't unfamiliar. Or, it was only unfamiliar because he wasn't being shot at. He'd repaired worse, but Jazz's energon levels were horribly low.

He finished patching what he could, what he had to. He put a rag in to sop up the worst of it. He looked at his scanner, at what Jazz's vitals were, and cursed. Far too low on energon. The mech might die anyway, of shock from both the injuries and the low volume of fluids in his lines.

He needed to do an energon transfusion.

It wasn't as if he hadn't done it hundreds of times before. In darkness, like this. For Terminus. His hands didn't even shake as he pierced his own chest plating, grunting with the discomfort: the small drill bit on the donor end was no fun. He waited for it to penetrate far enough and seat in the major energon line. He watched the donor vial fill, the sting fading to an ache, and then leaned over to make the connection for Jazz. He watched carefully as the flow of energon established, and then went back to work mopping out Jazz's chest cavity.

He'd forgotten how unpleasant this felt. There was a tugging pain deep in his own chest, as

energon moved too quickly in the wrong way, as the donor end worked to open the aperture in the line wider against the efforts of his own repair nanites.

That was enough energon out of the chest cavity that Jazz's electrical systems wouldn't set him on fire. Now to double check the tubing as Jazz's lines filled again. He found one small leak. Then he went to work trying to cover Jazz's spark at least a little.

There was a quiet whirr, and to his horror Megatron looked down and found Jazz looking bleakly back at him.

"Why are you online?" Megatron snapped.

Jazz tried a grin. It failed completely. "Intelligence model," he said. "We've got great recovery protocols. Sometimes we get into messes we have to walk out of."

"You're not walking out of this one," said Megatron. "Now stay the frag still." He palmed a pain chip into one of Jazz's ports. "Didn't think you'd need that. Most sensible mecha would be unconscious."

"Yeah well," Jazz winced, "Starscream promised he'd come back. Didn't realize it was you until you spoke."

"Starscream handed me your visor," said Megatron. "I'm afraid it's not immediately repairable."

"It was deep wired," said Jazz. "Special mod. It's going to be a pain in the aft to repair."

Megatron finished what he was doing and checked their energon levels. He was fine for the foreseeable future; his tank volume massively exceeded Jazz's. "It might be easier to replace your optics."

"Not gonna work, mech," said Jazz. "Problem's not with the optics. There's something wonky with how my processor deals with the input; it only reads about 30% of the data from my optics. The visor picks things up and translates them into something it can deal with. At least, that's what the medics said. Guess I got lucky they didn't just smelt me after the accident."

Megatron growled to himself.

"Well, they didn't," said Jazz. "Processor injury. Got my visual suite worst. But at least the visor picks up some wavelengths most people's optics don't, and I have full control of when it does that so I can't say I'm unhappy about it."

"I'm glad they repaired you," said Megatron, and then cursed as one of the patches started leaking again. He sealed it as quickly as he could. "I'd miss your company."

"Feels good to be appreciated." Jazz reached for his hand, and found the energon line. He squinted. "Is...is that fuzzy pink squiggle what I think it is?"

"Your energon levels are too critical for transport," said Megatron.

"Are you doing a direct energon transfusion on me?" said Jazz, voice rising into what was probably supposed to be a shriek but just was an outraged reedy rasp. "Are you seriously risking your fragging spark, Megatron?"

"I've done it plenty of times before," Megatron said, trying to sound soothing.

“You’ve done it plenty of times before? Were you doing this on the battlefield?” Jazz’s optics flared bright. “What the frag, mech, even spec ops people know that’s dangerous! You can’t go around—”

“It was before I got the Matrix,” said Megatron. “And before I met Ratchet. Or went to the Academy.”

“...so when you were a miner, then,” said Jazz.

“Yes.”

“What. The. Frag. Mech.”

“My...friend was injured in an accident. They cut his rations. He couldn’t work. They wouldn’t repair him. So every evening I shared my ration with him. Except they monitored us when we took our rations. So I stole one of these from the medbay and learned to use it.”

“Every evening,” said Jazz, faintly.

“Every evening. I’m quite practiced with it,” said Megatron. He checked Jazz again. “We’ll be able to move you soon. Your levels have definitely improved.”

“Yeah and your sanity hasn’t. You used to do this in a mine? In the dark?”

“There was a lantern. Most of the time.” Megatron refused to be ruffled. “It might surprise you, Jazz, but I am tougher than I look.”

“And dumber,” grumbled Jazz, and reached for his hand.

“So,” said Megatron. “What do we tell everyone else?”

“Starscream will tell Optimus,” said Jazz.

“And Optimus will believe him,” said Megatron. “I wonder if it might be simpler if they assume Starscream did kill you. Then I can be outraged on your behalf and you avoid future assassination attempts. I can put you back into stasis and take you to the refugee camp.”

“Yeah, good idea, but one condition,” said Jazz. “Don’t fragging hide it from Prowl.”

“I will not.” Megatron saw the levels even out and disconnected his end, hissing with discomfort.

“Aren’t you going to patch that?”

“No need,” he said.

“What?”

“Miner,” said Megatron. “All right. Wait for the rest of that to hit your systems and I’ll just slip you into stasis.”

“No lying to Prowler,” said Jazz sternly, catching his hand again. “Got it?”

“I have gotten it, yes,” said Megatron and palmed the stasis chip into place. “Sleep well, Jazz. We’ll work something out with Prowl.”

He cradled Jazz as he climbed down into the refugee camp. The refugees gathered, staring silently at him and his burden. Even a medic would have trouble telling that Jazz was still online; both he and Megatron were covered in energon, and Jazz had begun to gray a little around the edges of his doorwings and pedes as reduced energon circulation caused his chromatic nanites to die.

Megatron went, unspeaking, to the new medbay, pulled the tarps into some sort of privacy and said, "Send for Prowl."

"Is he..." said Ratchet, staring down at Jazz and Megatron jerked his head in a negative, and raised a pink-smear finger to his intake. "Don't want Starscream trying again," he said.

Prowl had been waiting just outside. He shoved his way into the room, optics wide with horror.

Megatron went to him and stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, leaned in close. "He's online," he whispered. "But Starscream wants him dead. We decided it would be easiest if Starscream thought he'd succeeded."

Prowl shoved him out of the way. "What the frag happened?"

"I'm not sure," said Megatron. He and Jazz had agreed he should have plausible deniability. He didn't know whether this included Prowl.

It...evidently didn't. Prowl leveled a long, suspicious glare at him. Megatron, realizing he wasn't going to be able keep this secret, flicked his optics in Ratchet's direction.

It seemed to mollify Prowl. He pushed past Megatron and went to Jazz, looking silently down at the ruin of his mate's chest. Then he smoothed a hand over the bloodied plating and his optics widened.

"Megatron," he said quietly, "is this from an energon transfer?"

"It is," said Megatron.

Both of them stared at him.

Megatron saw Ratchet begin to bristle and sighed heavily. "Ratchet, how do you think I kept Terminus alive in the mines?"

Ratchet gave him a look of complete horror.

"I'm not dead yet," Megatron reminded him.

"One wonders how," said Prowl drily. He'd moved to stand next to Jazz, one of Jazz's hands clasped between his own. "You say we will have to fake Jazz's death. That is not a permanent solution by any means."

"True." Megatron sighed heavily. Then he took Jazz's cracked visor out of subspace and placed it on the instrument tray. Both Ratchet and Prowl's optics went to it.

“Starscream gave me that,” he said. “He told me to leave his people alone, and he’d refrain from killing mine. I’m not sure what Jazz was up to,” a lie, he knew perfectly well, but Ratchet was right there, “but Starscream apparently imagined him a threat.”

Prowl stared at the visor. “Ratchet, can you...”

“I’ll try,” said Ratchet, but didn’t look happy.

“Starscream wanted him dead,” said Megatron. “I think construing this as anything less than a declaration of Starscream’s intent to seize undisputed command over the Decepticons is foolish. I think Optimus won’t believe that. And that, accordingly, we must assume that Starscream is an immediate danger to every mech in this camp, if not every mech in or out of the Decepticons who is not useful or loyal to him.”

Ratchet tried a laugh, a horrible short forced thing. “Surely that’s overstating it,” he said.

“No,” said Prowl. “It’s a logical assessment, and I agree entirely.” His gaze lifted, level and cold, and he met Megatron’s optics. “What are your orders, Megatron Prime?”

“We’ll need a list of the Decepticons who will probably come with us,” said Megatron. “The more combat trained, the better. Also, a list of the refugees who show promise. And I want you to begin drawing up plans to evacuate the entire camp. I fear that the change of circumstances will be abrupt and extreme; better we have an unneeded evacuation plan than lack a necessary one.”

“Seems reasonable,” said Prowl, high praise from him. “We’ll begin work on that.”

“And in the meantime, I’ll deal with Optimus. Doubtless, Starscream’s given him some immensely compelling reason for why he did try to kill Jazz,” said Megatron. “I’ll ensure that things won’t progress too quickly. All these arrangements need time.”

“Thank you,” said Prowl. Megatron nodded and turned to leave, only to be stopped by Ratchet.

“You sound like you’re planning a war,” he said. “You don’t think...”

“I think that Starscream is both selfish and brilliant,” said Megatron. “He’ll do anything he can to get power or revenge. Right now, he’s angry with me, angry enough to risk Optimus’s ire by killing one high ranking intelligence officer. Ruling anything out would be foolish.”

“Primus,” said Ratchet. “I hope you’re wrong.”

“So do I,” said Megatron, and went.

“Starscream says he caught Jazz attacking Pharma,” said Optimus. “He stepped in and Jazz was killed during the resulting altercation.”

“All I know is that I found Jazz dead,” said Megatron. The lie came effortlessly, and he could see the belief in Optimus’s optics. “I don’t know what he was or wasn’t doing, I just know he’s

dead. At Starscream's hands. What the frag kind of an army are you running, Optimus?"

Optimus was silent.

"Your second in command just killed one of your spymasters," said Megatron. "Doesn't that *concern* you, Optimus? Jazz was a valuable member of your command team. And an altercation between your officers just deprived the Decepticons of him."

"He was trying to kill Pharma," said Optimus. "Both Starscream and Pharma have confirmed this. Of course we'll have to investigate. What else would you have me do?"

"Starscream killed him," said Megatron. "Of that, there is no argument. So why does Starscream still have his freedom? If this were peace, if you knew that I, a medic or a miner, had killed some mech, I doubt I would have my liberty. Even if I were to start a barfight, I might not have my liberty. So why is Starscream treated so differently?"

"We're at war," said Optimus.

"Ah, so those who are useful to you get absolution without asking," said Megatron. "What happens when one of your mecha kills a civilian? Say, one he thinks is a threat? Another unfortunate incident, unpreventable, he says, he felt frightened and threatened and there was nothing else to be done, even though he was big and armed and the other mech was a civilian?"

"That will never happen," said Optimus.

"It was a reality we lived with, in the mines," said Megatron. "Forgive me if this reminds me of it."

"It's different," said Optimus. "Starscream says it was an accident."

"And you have reason to believe him, I suppose."

"I have no reason to disbelieve him—Megatron, what do you want from me?"

"Starscream confined to his quarters while a proper investigation is held," said Megatron. A proper investigation would have been immensely awkward—for one thing, it might well uncover that Jazz was still, in fact, alive—but he knew he wasn't going to get it. "Why is Jazz's life so much less valuable than Starscream's convenience, Optimus?"

"Because Starscream's story rings true to anyone who's seen Jazz and Pharma interact," said Optimus coldly. "And with what you reported last night—well, I find it completely believable that Jazz might have decided to take matters into his own hands."

"What you find believable isn't necessarily true," said Megatron.

"Stop trying to make trouble," snapped Optimus, rounding on him, taking three steps in close as if that would intimidate him. It didn't. They were the same height, and Megatron stared back into Optimus's optics, cool and unimpressed. "Megatron, what do you think any of this achieves? What are you fighting for—or are you only here to be difficult and make snide remarks? To divide us, rather than uniting us?"

"If you cannot see the problems I'm pointing out, there's more than enough division here already without my help," said Megatron. "I'm informing you of problems. I'm keeping your optics where they should be—on your people. And I'm warning you. Jazz's death can't just be let go with an investigation and nothing else. He deserves better. He deserves better than for you to simply

assume Starscream is correct."

"Starscream is an immensely valuable officer—"

"So was Jazz." Megatron took a harsh vent to steady himself. "Where does this stop, Optimus? Because unless you do something now, it won't be here. I beg of you, let it stop here. Before we lose control still further."

"We?" said Optimus. "I think you mean 'I'. You're not in this for us. You're in this for yourself—and if you're not center stage, you can't bear it. Revolution is more than your personal ego, Megatron, it cannot be run on a cult of personality."

"Tell that to Starscream," said Megatron. He huffed out a long vent. "Optimus. I am not trying to cause problems for you. I am pointing out the existing ones. If you don't do something, we'll all pay the price. Please, at least listen."

"I have listened," said Optimus, turning his back, "and you're wrong."

Megatron hesitated, looking at him. At last he said, "Where is Starscream?"

"Contacting one of our informants," said Optimus in a tone of absolute finality.

Starscream landed in Iacon with more of a flourish than was absolutely needed, and smirked at the honor guard waiting to take him before the Senate. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

He smiled through the pomp and the mealy-mouthed greetings. He followed them to the Senate floor itself, and looked up at the ranks of his enemies.

"So," he said. "You're ready to negotiate."

"Yes," said Senator Proteus, and Starscream only barely managed to hide his insult at the bored expression the Senator wore, as if this weren't worth his time. "We are."

Now Proteus stood, speaking more to his peers than to Starscream. "We hear the False Prime has somehow survived the vicious razing of the Basilica by his own followers. What we ask is simple; give him to us, and we will give the Decepticons, in turn, all the lands they currently hold."

It...was tempting. But he would never be held in esteem among the Decepticons if Megatron was simply handed over, a turbofox to a sparkeater. And it wouldn't fulfill his desire for revenge.

"Tempting," he said aloud. "But no. We don't abandon our own."

Proteus sneered. "You will get no better offer, Starscream of Vos."

"And that would certainly change my mind," said Starscream, and the sound of his null rays charging carried clearly through the chamber, echoing from polished metal and stained glass. "If I had actually come here to negotiate."

Chapter 68

Optimus was startled by how civil that evening's staff meeting was. Jazz's death—and he still mentally winced when he thought of it—cast a pall over the proceedings, but even Megatron was being restrained this time, and gave his report of the conditions at the refugee camp calmly and professionally. Optimus felt a mix of pride and relief. He was learning, no more going off half-cocked and full of righteous indignation.

When Megatron had first begun speaking of discontent, Optimus had been concerned. No one knew what had happened in those two years he'd been gone. The Functionists could have done anything to him, reprogrammed him, warped his mind, tortured him into compliance. But there was no more damage to his processor past what Trepan had done all those years ago, Ratchet assured him, and advised against using Soundwave. Megatron would take it ill. And Ratchet... Ratchet, usually, Optimus could trust, and for now, he trusted Megatron because of that and his own desire and respect. The mech meant what he'd said, what he fought for with his words, and that Optimus could accept, even with Starscream's cautions about the price of dissidence in their ranks.

It was good to see that Megatron had rediscovered his fire. Now he needed to learn to temper it with prudence.

Tonight was a good start. It probably helped that Starscream wasn't present.

Megatron finished his report, quiet, crisp, precise. Perhaps he spoke a little more quietly than he usually did, but there was little outward sign of his loss. Optimus nodded his approval and turned attention to the next offensive. They were looking down at the holotable when Megatron made a small stifled noise and collapsed where he stood like a dropped bag of bolts.

Optimus went to his knees next to him. Megatron's optics were lit but unseeing. He vented in harsh, sharp pants, the way a terrified or dying mech might. He was twitching, sharp jerks and long stillnesses.

Optimus tried shaking Megatron. No response. He tried slapping him. No response. He lay there and jerked and shook and did not respond.

"Call Ratchet," Optimus said to the mecha crowding around him. "Tell him—tell him Megatron's collapsed."

One moment, Megatron was standing at the strategy table, splitting his attention between the troop distributions in front of him and Optimus.

The next, he was shot.

He felt the energy bolt tear through him, the trace of something hot and sharp and too sudden to be pain through his chest and spark, he felt his optics flare and he felt death and for a moment he wondered why he was reliving this now—and then realized that no, the assassin's shot that had put him into stasis had struck him completely differently, and maybe he had been shot *again*, and the floor of the command center rushed up at him.

He didn't feel himself hit the ground. The confusion of lights over him resolved into something else, a long dark hall of polished metal and stained glass, and with a gasp he recognized

it, the Senate chambers, and he was seated high among the senators, looking down at a body in the next row below him, the sparkchamber blown out and energon daubed pink over the seats and floor around the graying frame.

Far below there was a Seeker frame, small but familiar. Megatron had a moment to crane, startled, to see if it really was Starscream, before the next shot blew his helm asunder.

It's the Matrix, he realized, finding himself in another body. *What the frag is this supposed to accomplish?*

But there was no answer. A blasterbolt ripped into his abdomen, his fuel tank, and the body he was in screamed as the energon combusted, burning him alive.

Another. There were two shots this time, one in the shoulder, one in the helm. In the moment where he staggered, gasping with shock and pain, he got a good look at his attacker's face—Starscream, certainly Starscream, before the world vanished in light and heat and pain.

The next Senator was running, the prickle of dread close on his plating, so close it felt like he was shot several seconds before the blast melted and opened his fuel pump to the world, spilling his energon across the steps. He took time to die, Megatron knew it—but he was snatched away into another death before the other mech vented his last.

There should have been security, but there wasn't. There should have been a way out, but there wasn't. Megatron felt his hands tug at a door, claw at it, runnels in the beautiful paneling, and heard the scream as the senator's life ended. Fast, that one, more than others had gotten.

One fell with a leg shot away, scrambled for an exit only to find Starscream there. "No, please," he heard the mech plead, felt his terror, his desperation. "Please, anything I have is yours!"

Starscream killed him anyway.

One hid under his seat. It didn't save him.

Megatron was with each. The Matrix made him know, learn, each and every one of them as they died. Some, the foulness was so thick he felt relieved to be free of them. Some didn't seem so different from many of the Decepticons he knew. Some were stupid and thought the system was the only way, that they were doing their best. Some were simply ignorant.

The Senate wasn't thoroughly foul. But each and everyone of them had been complicit. And Starscream killed all of them, glitchmice in a pit with a starving turbofox, and Megatron lived through each and every one of their deaths in all their agony. There was no way to make this pretty, to gild this mass murder and make it something to be proud of. It was ugly, it was horrible, it stank of semiprocessed energon and stale oil. Megatron lay twitching, burning, staring up at a ceiling eclipsed by Seeker wings and a merciless pair of optics, red, centers burning orange.

Every mech he died with was guilty, he knew, and yet their deaths were terrible. And yet—and yet, Megatron found himself triumphant, even as the death-agonies tore through the bodies he visited, as he felt their encompassing terror. Because they had inflicted this on others, again, and again, and again, sitting here with no understanding of it.

This may be the saving of us, the Matrix told him, as he shared the body of a Senator who smeared himself with energon and covered himself with the corpse of a colleague. *This is the death of those who would kill us. Yet, will you take it lightly? You should not see this as a convenient elimination of enemy pawns. They too, are your people. You are responsible to them as well, not only the*

Decepticons or the refugees. You should know, intimately, what this costs.

Starscream above him again. Someone had put up a fight. Energon streamed down white plating, but the optics were terribly calm. With the air of someone finishing a task, he raised his arm-mounted weapon, leveled at Megatron's face, and fired once more.

Megatron was flat on his back in the command center, staring up at familiar lights. He coughed to clear his vents of imaginary energon and the thick taste of alien panic. Optimus and Ratchet's faces came into view, Optimus desperately worried. Ratchet was hiding it better.

"I told you it was the Matrix," said Ratchet. "Hey, kid. How're you feeling?"

Megatron pushed himself upright, still venting hard. He looked around the room, the worried faces of the command staff, the clean bright floor without energon or the stink of death, up at Optimus and Ratchet.

"The war is over," he said, not believing his own voice. "Starscream has killed the Senate."

They stared down at him. They didn't believe him—most of them, at least, didn't believe him. Megatron pushed himself to his knees. "It was the Matrix," he said.

"Or you've just gone insane," said someone cheerfully and Pharma sauntered around the strategy table. "We have no records of the Matrix giving anyone visions, not for thousands of years. Why should we believe *you*? It's much more likely that it's interfacing incorrectly with your circuits."

Megatron felt his lips lift away from his sharpened dentae, the impulse much harder to restrain with Ratchet's worried presence next to him.

The air over the strategy table went *vwop*, the concussive force scattering datapads, and Starscream and Skywarp thudded into the middle of the table. With them came a stink of ozone and burnt energon and spent oil. Death.

Starscream shook off his trinemate. He hauled himself to his feet and stood, wobbling, on the table. Megatron's vision had been correct; energon trickled steadily from a number of wounds, none truly life threatening, but enough to be extremely painful.

Starscream—always the dramatic one, always the mech who would voice his discomfort loudly and with little respect for whoever might happen to be around—Starscream stood there with a fanged smile to match the most gleeful of Megatron's own, and said, "The Senate is no more. We've won."

Everyone looked to Megatron, who hadn't yet gotten to his feet.

"Yeah," said Ratchet. "We know."

Megatron stared steadily up at Starscream as everyone in the room started talking at once. For a moment he wondered if Starscream might attack him. The expression on the Seeker's handsome face was the same as he'd seen again and again through the dying optics of the Senate.

He gave Starscream a small smile in return, then rose and left. His going was mostly unremarked, the Decepticon high command too preoccupied with shouting at one another to note his absence, but Ratchet joined him.

"So what happens now?" Ratchet asked, quiet and worried.

"I don't know," said Megatron. "But we both know where our responsibilities lie."

When he glanced at Ratchet, he found the other mech smiling a small, grim smile.

"Well," said Ratchet, "I sure as frag raised *you* right."

The next months blurred.

With the deaths of the Senate, the Functionists collapsed. In the cities they still had, rioting citizens, civilians and military alike, deposed regional governments. Conditions had become bad, between energon rationing and crackdowns on dissidents, and the fall of the Senate was a message to the average mech: they are vulnerable. They are like us. They are not gods.

And the populace took that at face value.

The Senate had supporters. People who'd benefitted too much under the old system to walk away from it. People who believed in them. People who had made too many enemies. The war wasn't over, not at first, but the tables had turned. Now the Decepticons were a conquering army, mopping up resistance as they went.

The refugees and Hot Rod's people occupied an uncertain space in this new world. The Decepticons were less interested than ever in noncombatants, less patient—but Megatron insisted on at least one rescue transport per incursion.

He was sitting in one of those transports now, jolting over a badly-shelled road and wincing, as usual, at Hot Rod's driving. Hot Rod was fine on his own wheels—indeed, he was even impressive—but the problem was he drove the transport exactly the same way he drove himself and it was awful. Megatron had a gyro/purge reflex override on his shortlist of frequently used internal commands now.

"So I was thinking," said Hot Rod, with one hand on the wheel and the other elbow out the window, as if this were a pleasure drive, and they weren't surrounded by an army of angry mecha, traveling over a road that was more crater than surface (and might contain unexploded ordinance), "we need a *name*."

"Funny," said Megatron. "And here I was thinking we needed to blast shield the damn transport better. But go on."

"Swerve was proposing Crusader Cons," Hot Rod said, thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Megatron slowly. "That sounds like the sort of thing Swerve would propose. Perhaps we should consider cutting off his supply of offworld entertainment; it seems to have melted his processor."

"You're no fun. Besides, he supplies half the camp. You'd have a revolt on your hands."

Megatron groaned. "Do we have any other proposals besides," he raised his fingers to make air quotes, "*crusader cons*."

"Weeeeeelllllll..." said Hot Rod. "So I was thinking, you know how other species say we're

autonomous robotic organisms?"

"Yes?" said Megatron, already suspicious, and grabbed the sides of his seat again as Rodimus bounced them over a pothole, hard.

"It got me to thinking. Because the Decepticons are fighting for—something, honestly, kinda beats me because I don't think they're gonna stop when we've got the planet calmed down, right?—and us, the normal people?"

"Yes?" coaxed Megatron, who wasn't sure he belonged in that "normal people" category.

"We just...want to live our lives. You know? Without anyone telling us how to do it or what to do. Without looking over our shoulders or being military or whatever. We just want to live the way we want to. We want autonomy." Hot Rod swerved around a massive crater, just barely missing getting a wheel stuck. "So, I thought, Autobots. You know. Autonomous. And Bot. Which to be honest sounds better than Autocon which sounds like we're tricking ourselves or something. Autobots. It just...sounds good."

It did sound good. "I'll consider it."

"And I'm thinking of renaming myself. *Rodimus*," Hot Rod said, as if the whole thing were dusted with lead sprinkles. He took both hands off the wheel to gesture; Megatron dove across the control console to steady the wheel with a hand, shooting Hot Rod a glare as he did.

"That's up to you," said Megatron, once Hot Rod was deigning to use both hands again. "You want me to use that?"

"Yeah," said Rodimus, enthusiastically, and then, "Also, we need a symbol."

Megatron spared a hand to put it over his face with a groan. "How about I just make you director of public relations, then?"

Rodimus turned his head to wink charmingly at Megatron. "Well, I've got the face for it!"

They went over another lump, Megatron narrowly avoiding hitting his helm. "Yes, and you're wasted as a driver," he grouched.

But the name stuck.

Winning the war made life immensely more complicated. It was very rare Optimus found himself on the battlefield these days. But the paperwork was never-ending.

At least he had Starscream's help.

It was late. Megatron was off providing aid, so he wasn't around to bristle (albeit more politely, of recent) at Starscream. Optimus missed him. He hoped that the lull in his hostility to Starscream might mean he was finally settling better into the command structure.

He also hoped that it meant Megatron might warm to him once again. He understood Megatron's distress at Jazz's death. But he couldn't do more than investigate, to let fair and due process take its course, and what it had turned up was that Jazz had indeed been attacking Pharma,

and that Starscream had been defending both of them.

Megatron had taken it hard.

Optimus could only hope that the rift in their...relationship could still be mended. Without him having to compromise unacceptably for Megatron—Megatron might hate Starscream, but for all his rough edges, Starscream was a significant asset to the Decepticons.

And, Optimus would dare to say now, a good friend. Here he was now, helping dig through the newest pile of paperwork, annotating plans as they went. In the middle of their work, Starscream spoke.

"We need to consider what happens after we stabilize the planet," he said, and perched on the edge of the strategy table, datapad in hand. He met Optimus's eyes soberly. "We're getting there. We'll need a plan."

"We'll return power to a civilian government," said Optimus, trying not to sound surprised. "Elections, and then—"

"Yes, a civilian government," said Starscream, as if he had something on his mind. "Optimus, a civilian government means a Prime."

"It does," said Optimus.

"It means putting Megatron in power," said Starscream. "Do we really want to do that? You know that the powers of a Prime have been circumscribed by the Senate of recent, but Megatron is popular, and the actual written law supports giving him a considerable degree of power. Do we really want to risk that?"

Optimus looked at him, puzzled. "Why is it a risk? Megatron's experienced the worst excesses of power. I believe that he would have learned the desirability of restraint, of respect for personhood, if nothing else."

"Are you sure of that?" said Starscream. Optimus would have bristled, but his tone was regretful and tentative, as if he didn't much like what he was saying. "I'm sorry to question him—he's the reason we're standing here. But are you sure of that? The idea of "peace through tyranny" came up a few times in his later writings, just before he was shadowplayed."

"I disagreed with the philosophy," said Optimus. "None of his actions to date have reflected that."

"Have they?" said Starscream. "I've heard your debates with him, Optimus. And I'm worried. Megatron is inexperienced in command, and he seems to take any denial of power badly. Recall his reactions when he doesn't get what he wants. The refugees trained for war. Pharma expelled from the Decepticons. He expects his word to be law for us all, and when faced with reasonable constraints like due process, he sulks. He means well, or at least I hope he does, but do you really want him in power?"

Optimus hesitated.

"At the very least," said Starscream, "he needs time before he can become a responsible leader. Even if his powers were limited. He has no real experience, Optimus. He went from the mines to a medical student, totally dependent on Ratchet. And now this? With all those refugees staring worshipfully at him everywhere he goes? It would be enough to ruin anyone."

"I wish you were incorrect, Starscream," said Optimus slowly.

"We'll need to limit the powers of the Prime," said Starscream decisively. "That will take time. Better that we stay in power long enough to set up something responsible that will *work*. Then we turn it over to a proper civilian government. A *civilian* government, not a theocracy, which is what I'm afraid it might turn into otherwise. Primus," he paused, looking disturbed. "It's all too possible some clever spark could use him as a puppet. Has that occurred to you? He trusts so easily."

Optimus thought of Jazz and his suspicions, his last murder attempt, and slowly nodded. "I wish you weren't right to worry, Starscream," he said.

"Better we take our time to build a good government, rather than rush it and leave it in the hands of a would-be tyrant," said Starscream. Optimus could only agree.

They spent two days on that mission. They helped relocate the civilians and provide them with supplies. Megatron stabilized the wounded for transport back to the base. This particular mission wasn't bad; he wasn't being shot at.

Then they headed home.

"How was it?" asked Prowl, opening the transport door so Megatron could step out and down.

"It went about as well as could be expected," said Megatron, looking around. "Any news?"

"We've got a number of new recruits," said Prowl. "Training's going well. Spec-Ops wants to see you as soon as possible."

Special Operations was the arm of Megatron's organization—yes, Autobots really did suit them—that he'd spent the last two months carefully hiding from Decepticon High Command. If directly questioned, Megatron would cast Spec-Ops as a scout force, a way to determine which areas needed aid most, and a way to make sure that aid arrived. What nothing short of shadowplay would drag out of him was that they were spying just as much on the Decepticons as they were on previously Functionist territory.

He also didn't care to admit that his Autobots in combat training—which was most of them, as no Autobot would want to be wandering around the main base without at least a basic knowledge of how to twist an unwanted hand off at the wrist—weren't just endearingly incompetent at personal defense. They might act that way when a Decepticon officer came through (it was amazing how idiotic Cliffjumper and Bumblebee, for example, could act), but they weren't. The number of the competent grew daily.

Megatron was raising an army.

Right under Starscream and Optimus's noses.

He would have been very happy to see another solution, but he didn't. He harbored no illusions that Starscream wanted him dead. Sooner or later, the delicate balance of power would be disrupted, and something would light the energon cube they were all sitting on, and when that

happened, Megatron intended to be forewarned and forearmed.

And have a similarly warned and armed army at his back.

"Rung has issues he'd like to discuss with you," Prowl went on. "Common psychological issues he's seeing in the people here. And Ratchet wants you in before your next run to strip your paint. He'd like you not to show up like," he glanced down at his datapad, "'An energon flare in Unicron's aft', to quote directly."

"Let's start with Spec-Ops," said Megatron, smothering his amusement.

Jazz was coordinating, had been as soon as he'd come back online. He was still complaining about not getting to be in the field himself, but both Megatron and Prowl had vetoed that. Too much risk of being caught.

"Look at you, all in one piece," he said, upon Megatron arriving in his office, carefully hidden in the bowels of the camp. He'd repainted himself, modified his helm, and done nearly a dozen other things to change his appearance. He wasn't easily recognizable, and he was staying out of sight. "All sorts of excitement while you've been gone, my mech. Here's the news..."

After Jazz's report, Megatron went to Rung, a charming, small psychologist. Megatron kept having trouble with his name, but he was both forgiving and incredibly useful, both for winnowing out people who'd been compromised by shadowplay, and for the psychological needs of a large group of people who almost all had left their lives under the worst possible circumstances.

And then to Ratchet, who checked him over, seemed indignant at every small dent, and then whisked him into the washracks to strip his paint. "Isn't this optional?" Megatron protested, rather weakly.

"The fragging Functionist snipers have been aiming for anyone in white," said Ratchet, scrubbing. The fumes of paint thinner rose, strong enough to make Megatron's optics produce lubricant. "Aid and I—well, we're not out of the base that much. But you're running around out there *all the time*, and you know what? I don't want you dead again."

Megatron *had* rued his paint a few times, a handful in front of Ratchet, but hadn't had enough time to do anything about it. He grumbled, for show, and settled back.

"I saw the roster," said Ratchet. "You're off again in 12 hours."

Megatron hummed acknowledgement.

"With Starscream," said Ratchet. "Megatron, I don't have to tell you to be careful, do I? I'm fairly sure he wants you dead."

"I'm fairly sure he wants me dead, too," said Megatron. "I will be careful. By the way, Hot Rod is going by Rodimus now, and he's proposing names for the movement."

"Oh Primus," said Ratchet, scrubbing. "Go on."

"Autobots."

"Well, that's surprisingly not horrible."

That was about as good as praise. Megatron chuckled softly and started work on his front.

"You stripped your paint," said Optimus, sounding startled, and Starscream looked up as Megatron entered the room. He, too, had to blink. He was used to Megatron in medic's white and red. Now he was gray, his medics' insignia still picked out clearly. The gray gave him a stern, foreboding aspect, made him loom. As he had, briefly, when he'd first ascended to the Primacy. He looked like a military leader, not the civilian aid worker he'd been acting for the last few months.

Starscream's optics narrowed. What was the fragger playing at now?

"Ratchet said I made too big of a target and he was tired of cleaning singe marks off my back. I'm here for the briefing."

Still cold and professional. Optimus looked disappointed. Starscream wished the stupid fragger would stop mooning over Megatron. The mech was obviously uninterested, and even more obviously not worth his time. "Of course. Please come in. Starscream's got the maps..."

Oh put Starscream on the spot, would he? Starscream didn't visibly bristle, but waved Megatron over, watching him carefully. Megatron might be content to fade into the background just now, but he hadn't acted cowed after Jazz's death. Starscream didn't like that at all. Anyone with sense would have been cowed.

He didn't think of Megatron as much of a threat. But he wasn't stupid. Megatron obviously knew he had supporters. Megatron didn't spook easily. Megatron, therefore, was still dangerous.

Starscream wanted him out of the way. No, Starscream wanted him hurt. Humiliated. Utterly broken. Not just dead, because dead meant the cause would have a martyr and then he'd *never* stop hearing the arrogant, self-righteous fragger's name, and Optimus would do something incredibly stupid like go into permanent mourning.

Starscream thought of his return from the Senate. Exhausted, wounded, having just achieved victory—and not even being met with surprise, because somehow, somehow, Megatron had *known*, had told *everyone*, had taken his victory from him without even being there, and all because of what, the Matrix? Frag him. It should have been a deciding triumph. Instead, it'd been some mystical thing, with everyone oohing and aahing over some vision the fragger had probably *faked*.

But there was nothing Starscream could do about it, no way to reveal the Prime as an attention-hungry charlatan, and so he had to put up with the mech, intolerable in his concern for everyone, his utter arrogance.

Megatron was looking over his shoulder now with polite interest and wide optics. Starscream wished he knew what lay under that exterior, because it couldn't be what Megatron projected. It couldn't be a totally reckless heroism and a deep regard for everyone. The mech had yet to display a selfish impulse and no one (except for Optimus) on the fragging planet could actually be like that. Starscream hated both Megatrons, the one he saw now, and what he knew had to be lurking underneath.

One day he'd break that. One day he'd show the world a Megatron that it could hate. And he'd make the mech scream while he was at it.

He turned his attention back to the mission briefing. If he was very, very lucky, that day

would be very soon.

"Be careful, kid."

Megatron paused in the act of heaving himself up, one foot on the running board of the transport. "I have Rodimus watching my back, Ratchet. I'll be fine—and besides, I'm driving this time."

"Because you're *BORING*," called Rodimus from the other side of the transport.

"I'm not joking," said Ratchet. "You're with one of Starscream's groups. Watch your aft."

"I concur with Ratchet," said Prowl. "Be careful. Do not antagonize Starscream. Do not give him any reason to suspect us, or to escalate a situation with you. Keep quiet. Do not engage. And avoid him as much as possible. I'd rather deal with the fallout of him declaring you a coward to everyone than him getting a chance to test your combat skills. You will not come out ahead, under those circumstances."

Megatron chuckled a little. "Would you believe that you're not the first person to caution me about this even in the last hour? He was quite forceful."

"He was quite *right*," said Prowl. There was really only one mech to whom they could be referring, and Megatron was sure that Prowl's speech was very much an extension of Jazz's concerns. "Be careful, Megatron. Please."

"We need you," said Ratchet. Not praise. A reminder of responsibility.

Megatron sobered. "I will be careful," he said, and slung himself up into the drivers' seat of the transport.

He shouldn't have promised to be careful. They'd only been in the city for four hours, and Megatron was fit to chew steel walls into filings. Starscream's Decepticon "peacekeepers" were constantly underfoot. No sooner would Megatron begin talking to someone who was in some sort of position of authority than one of those peacekeepers would drag the mech away for some reason or another, usually with some poor excuse of security. He and Rodimus had guards. "For your own safety," Starscream had said, but the guards scared people away. Even the medic's insignia on Megatron's shoulders didn't soothe them enough.

In short, they couldn't work, and Starscream's paranoia was making an already difficult task impossible, actively undermining the trust of the locals, and accomplishing nothing, because no one had been shot at even once. They weren't under attack, and yet...

Still worse, this was a mining area; many of the people looked a lot like Megatron, and it was the ones who looked like him (big, strong, heavily reinforced) who were getting the very worst treatment.

Megatron successfully intervened in each case he'd seen so far. It was the ones he wasn't seeing that made the energon in his lines run cold.

"Primus," said Rodimus, putting it into words for him, "what a pompous gasket Starscream is. We might as well not be here."

"Better that we be here and keep them from doing worse," said Megatron, and stalked onward.

The group of mecha didn't see them approach. There were a few Decepticons, and one miner, cornered. The miner had his hands raised. By the way his head was tilted, by his body language, he was worried. He was trying to back up. The Decepticon peacekeepers, particularly the one in the lead, some sort of flightframe, had drawn their weapons.

Megatron couldn't reconstruct the sequence of events, afterward. Not fully. At some point, the miner stumbled. He lowered his arms to catch himself, lurching forward.

And at some point, the lead Decepticon shot him. Perfectly. Brain, spark, t-cog.

Part of Megatron wanted to see what was bad but more understandable, if only by a sliver: the miner's gesture seeming like a threat, the Decepticon overreacting. But part of him saw something else, the miner stumbling *because* the mech had shot him unprovoked. Something in Megatron's spark said the latter.

One thing was definite.

The Decepticon thought it was funny. He turned to his companions like it was a joke, like he'd done something clever.

Megatron lunged.

He ended up sitting on the mech in the end, having made it very clear to him that he was under arrest. Bold as his companions were, they didn't want to argue with a Prime. They stood around, awkwardly, until Starscream arrived.

"So what seems to be the matter here?" he asked.

Megatron pulled the miscreant's helm up. "He shot a civilian. That civilian."

"I thought I was in danger!" the mech said. "I was in danger. I did what I had to!"

"Get off of him, Megatron," said Starscream, sounding both tired and reasonable.

Belatedly remembering Prowl's words, Megatron did as he was instructed. "He murdered a civilian," he said again. "The miner, there. He was complying with the directions given." He stared around at the mecha there, then looked back at the mech responsible. His sidearm, the same he had charged the Functionists with, felt heavy on his hip. "He shot him."

"The mech lunged for me," the Decepticon said, eyes wide. Now he did sound scared. "I thought he was going to kill me."

There was a murmur of agreement from the other mecha on his team.

"These things happen," said Starscream. "We'll have an inquiry, I'm sure."

An inquiry. Like the ones that had failed to give Ratchet and Jazz justice. "Not good enough," said Megatron. "I saw it. The mech stumbled. He wasn't aggressive, he *stumbled*. And this cretin *murdered him* for it."

"Obviously you're overwrought," said Starscream, glancing lazily at the corpse on the other side of the courtyard. "He was a miner. Of course you felt some connection. I see no evidence that protocol wasn't followed."

The murderer and his companions let out a long vent and looked at each other. They smirked.

"That's not what happened," said Megatron. Rodimus moved forward.

"He's right, Starscream," he said. "The miner wasn't doing anything wrong."

"Of course you back your friend," said Starscream. "It's better to move past this. It's just your word against theirs. No one would take the incident seriously."

"There's a mech dead!" said Megatron. "An unarmed, civilian mech!"

"How unfortunate," said Starscream. He met Megatron's horrified gaze. "There's nothing to be done, Megatron. Your word against theirs." He lowered his voice and smirked. "No one would take yours seriously."

Megatron stared at Starscream's smirk. The fragger didn't care that a mech had just died—not an enemy combatant, but a civilian whose protection had been Megatron's responsibility. He hadn't been threatening. He'd been in the wrong place, at the wrong time. He had misunderstood an instruction. He'd been no match for the Decepticon who had shot him out of hand. And Starscream was pretending that this was *justified*.

The Matrix was an enraged seethe around his spark, supporting, pushing him to do something *more*. The mech to their side, the mech cradling the blaster still humming with charge from killing a defenseless miner, the mech with something between relief and arrogance on his faceplate, he was a *threat*. He was a threat to every civilian in the base, every civilian outside it. Everyone that the Prime was supposed to help.

Megatron had accepted the damned parasite for a reason. If anyone wanted to hurt the helpless, they would have to go through him first.

He turned to the murderer. He lifted his own blaster, barely registering the flare of surprise in Starscream's optics, and fired three times.

Brain. Spark. T-cog. Rossum's Trinity, one after another, neat and surgical.

The murderer was dead before he hit the ground.

"If you valued him and his judgement so much, you would have had him defend them in a fair trial," he said. "Now you must rely on my judgement instead—and that of the Matrix."

Starscream's wings hiked with shock and rage. "That was murder!"

“So was what he did,” said Megatron. “A spark for a spark. Barbaric, but fair. I will do this to anyone who harms a civilian.”

The assembled Decepticons looked at each other and shuffled back from him.

“We are here to protect them,” said Megatron, meeting each pair of optics in turn. But there was no understanding there. Condemnation. Fear. “What are we, if we’re afraid of the very people who rely on us? What are we if we kill them? That is what the Functionists did. Are you the Functionists’ nemesis, or their successors?” He gestured to the body of the miner. “Because that—that argues that you are their successors.”

Starscream's face moved from shock to ill-feigned regret. Rodimus looked from one to the other, optics wide and horrified.

"Continue with the peacekeeping mission," said Starscream to Thundercracker. "Arrest Megatron. I'll take him back to base."

Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Megatron didn't resist. Nor did he argue. He quietly allowed himself to be cuffed. He sat, silent, in the bombed-out office Starscream herded him into after sending a runner to go find Skywarp.

His expression, if it could be called an expression at all, was of waiting. He looked blank. Like something not quite alive. It was creepy as frag.

"You should be frightened," Starscream told him.

Megatron snorted softly.

"You killed a Decepticon, Megatron," Starscream said. He couldn't stand it. How did Megatron so consistently imagine he was this much better than anyone else? "Not even Optimus can forgive you for this. You're not escaping the consequences. Not again. Does that even register in your thick, arrogant processor? You reached too far this time."

Megatron still didn't respond.

"Hopefully, Optimus will have enough sense to just offline you for this," said Starscream. "We can pitch your corpse into a smelting pit, just like the disposable you are. After all you've tried, how does that sound? Ending up where you would have anyway?"

A faint, superior smile touched Megatron's lips. It made him look disgustingly noble, sitting there in cuffs with his helm held high. Starscream wanted to strike him.

"Oh, death doesn't scare you? How about imprisonment? How about ejection from the Decepticons?"

"The Decepticons are corrupt," said Megatron. "You prove it to me with every word."

"Oh good, you remembered how to speak," sneered Starscream. "Corrupt, are we? I'm not the one who just murdered a soldier and expects to get away with it because he's a Prime."

"Yes, you already had gotten away with it," said Megatron. "You killed Jazz to intimidate me. That, too, was murder."

"Murder?" said Starscream. "I was trying to stop him from killing Pharma."

"Oh, come now, Starscream," said Megatron, condescending. "It's just the two of us, we can be honest. You killed him because you wanted to scare me. I'm medically trained, Starscream. I know you didn't want him to die quick."

Frag. Starscream hadn't thought of that.

"You wanted him to die alone in the dark. And you wanted me to know he'd died like that, so I'd what, feel too guilty to ever oppose you again? There's little moral superiority to be found here, Starscream." That smile turned crooked, a little grim. "Even if Optimus doesn't believe me on that count."

"He won't believe you on this, either," said Starscream viciously.

Megatron was silent, which Starscream took to mean that he'd won.

"Frag!" Prowl snarled when Jazz forwarded the intercepted message to him. "How could he be that stupid? I told him not to antagonize Starscream!"

"Oh, it gets worse," said Jazz, grim. "He killed someone."

"What?" Prowl froze. Jazz watched his partner's doorwings shiver as he processed that. "He killed—why?"

"Mech shot a civilian in front of him. Starscream refused to make an arrest, and Megatron...lost his temper."

"Are you telling me our Prime *lost his temper* and *killed someone*?"

"Yes," said Jazz.

Prowl's hands clenched on his desk.

"Prowler," said Jazz, realizing the route the other mech's thoughts were going down, "I've killed mecha under similar circumstances without losing my temper."

"It was incredibly stupid," said Prowl, staring past him. "I don't care what the mech was doing. It was incredibly stupid and self-indulgent and self-righteous and we can't afford him doing things like that. This is bigger than any of us, Jazz."

"It sure is," said Jazz, as gently as he could. "But... well, I'm biased, but scaring the frag out of the Decepticons re: killing civilians isn't the worst thing."

"He *murdered* someone," said Prowl.

"Yup," said Jazz.

"He murdered someone *on our side*."

"Yup, and I agree, it was really fragging stupid of him. If he was going to do it, he should have made sure not to get caught. He let his temper lead him and now he's in this mess. Hopefully, he'll learn from it. Hopefully, me and my mechs can fish him out of it so he'll still be around to learn from it."

"Jazz," said Prowl, restating an old argument, "murder is *wrong*."

Jazz flickered half his new visor (thank you, Ratchet) in a wink. "Only if you get caught," he said, and then realized it was absolutely not the time. "Look. Prowl. I agree, it was wrong, and it was incredibly stupid, and he shouldn't have done it. But I can't say that if I'd been there I wouldn't have been cheering him on. They shot a miner in front of him. Someone like him, Prowl. You know what manual labor used to be like. Bet it's not the first time he's seen that. Frag, he probably looked down the barrels of more blasters before the war than he has since he woke up."

Prowl still looked unconvinced. Jazz sighed. Time for an anecdote.

"So I was talking some with Mirage the other day," he said. "And you know how a bunch of the noble houses, the ones that got debts they don't wanna admit to, raise domestic turbofoxes?"

Prowl nodded, obviously mystified. But calming down. Jazz would settle for that.

"Well, you gotta trap some stock wild. And you gotta refresh your lines sometimes, so you trap more of 'em wild. And you gotta check the traps real often. Mirage's household had someone who they had custom sparked to check the big traps, the ones that can get multiple turbofoxes in 'em at a time. You know why?"

Prowl just looked sidelong at Jazz. "I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Because when you got a bunch of turbofoxes in a trap, they go a little stir crazy. They start attacking each other. The trap freaks 'em out, and they blame each other, much as mechainimals can cast blame. And they eat each other. It's got nothing to do with hunger. You can leave 'em in there for two hours, and they'll eat each other. Seems like, the default reaction of a turbofox to another turbofox getting up in his space is to eat the other guy. And that's us, right now. We're a planet full of turbofoxes... and the mech that checks the traps, the mech that set the trap? Ain't coming around no more."

Prowl contemplated this.

"We're a planet full of crazy," Jazz said, driving his point home. "How many years have we been taught to blame each other for what the Functionists did? Well, they're gone, but they trained us, and now it's time to eat the other mech."

"Presumably the nobility has ways of getting their turbofoxes not to eat each other," said Prowl. "How does one train a turbofox?"

Jazz grinned. "Get him to expect regular meals." He sobered again. "Megs snapped. He shouldn'ta snapped, he shoulda known better. It was damn stupid. But one of us would have done it sooner or later. Now's the time to fish him out of the smelter—primus, please, not literally—get him back on his feet, and treat him to a nice long lecture on doing his arguing with words or fists instead of a blaster. He's an idealist, and far too hotheaded, and he hasn't properly led before, but damn if we don't need him. He'll learn. We gotta make sure he lives long enough to do so."

Prowl just stared at him.

"They love him, Prowl," Jazz said softly. He knew it was true. Frag, he was one of that 'them'. The memory of Megatron's gravely worried face over him—really only a mass of light and shadow—and the realization of what, exactly, the mech was doing, what the slow warmth in his lines was, made something stir in him he'd thought himself far too jaded to feel. "They love him. A bunch of them are only going to be happier with him for this. He didn't just happen on that love, he's earned it. Don't discount him over this."

"I'm not sure I can trust a mech who's done something like this," said Prowl.

"I understand," said Jazz, who didn't really. "That's your job to decide. But I think we'd better get the Autobots cleared out asap. Incidents like this stir slag, and you never know what's gonna float to the top. I'll go rescue our fearless leader."

"He killed a civilian," said Megatron. "I will not apologize for doing the same to him."

Optimus pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd thought better of Megatron. A very great deal better. But the mech had killed someone. Someone helpless. And now...

"He murdered that mech, Optimus," said Megatron. "He didn't think it would matter. He was *laughing*. I warned you about this—you can't seriously expect me to stand by and let it happen?"

"I expect you not to commit murder yourself," said Optimus coldly. "Starscream was there. Why did you not simply report the incident to him and let him handle it?"

"He refused to take it seriously."

Optimus looked at Starscream. "Is that true?"

"Of course not," said Starscream, and Optimus relaxed a little; he was glad he'd been right in his assessment of Starscream. "I offered an investigation. Megatron instead opted to shoot the mech."

"Primus," said Optimus softly, horrified. "Megatron. Why did you do it?"

"He shot a civilian," Megatron repeated, stubborn as ever. "And he laughed."

"You're exaggerating," said Starscream. "My troops would never do that." He turned to Optimus. "There might be some personal grudge there that he's not telling us," he said softly, this time his eyes went wide and he dragged at Optimus's elbow. "Optimus. A word."

Optimus let himself be pulled aside. The urgency in Starscream's face was frightening. "Optimus, what if he's shadowplayed? Soundwave never examined him. He just had the medical examination, and Ratchet assured us he couldn't be shadowplayed, but what if he's wrong? What if..." Starscream glanced over his shoulder. "It's just a chance. Not much of one, I guess but... I don't think we could risk it. Imagine it, Optimus, the *Prime*, shadowplayed. Think of the damage he could do."

Optimus could. And...there were ways to repair it. And it was easier to accept than the idea that Megatron might murder someone out of hand. "You think he should be examined."

"Yes," said Starscream. "We have to. Because if this wasn't him..."

A certain hope sprang in Optimus's spark. He wouldn't have to change how he thought of Megatron if that were true. But...Megatron shadowplayed, again. That was too horrible to imagine.

It might explain the combativeness, though. How difficult he'd become. And the young shy medic he'd first met would never have been capable of something like this.

It wouldn't be too cruel. After all, they'd had to examine others, usually rescued civilians with heavy frames and unusually confrontational attitudes. Sometimes they'd even had to restrain them; there was a chair stolen from a functionist facility for just that purpose. It certainly looked bad, but it was better than the alternatives.

Optimus hesitated. Would restraint be necessary?

As if he'd read Optimus's mind, Starscream said, "We may have to restrain him. I don't know how he'll react and I'm worried about him injuring Soundwave, if it comes to that."

Optimus liked that even less, but he had to keep his Decepticons safe.

"I agree," he said, heavily. "We should have Soundwave examine him."

Megatron knew something was off when Optimus let Starscream pull him aside. His concern grew as he watched them talk, frowned at their nervous glances back to him. When Optimus turned back to him, he knew it was bad; Optimus's face, behind the mask, bore an expression of unease and determination. He was about to do something he didn't want to. That he thought might be wrong. He was going to do it anyway.

Megatron dug his heels in when Optimus stood in front of the chair. "You've decided on something," he said, his own suspicion evident in his voice. "You can't kill me. The refugees won't stand for it. The Decepticons won't."

"Don't be overdramatic, Megatron," said Optimus. Starscream slipped around behind him and he flinched as an inhibitor claw closed over his back. Not too close to his helm, thank Primus. He didn't want to panic in front of them.

Optimus pulled him easily out of the chair. He staggered; the inhibitor claw had decreased the outputs to his frame, weakening him but not completely restraining him.

He hated it. He couldn't fight them like this.

Optimus noticed him tensing. "We're not going to hurt you, Megatron," he said gently, and began walking.

Megatron glanced around as they descended. He'd not been in this part of the base. He hadn't known this part of the base existed. Starscream crowded him from behind, and the steady pull Optimus exerted on the cuffs made escape extremely unlikely.

There was no one around.

He hadn't seen a one of his Autobots since being brought back. He wondered if he ought to regret his actions, but the memory of the fear on the miner's face. Of his fall—no, he couldn't. But he was worried now. It shouldn't have been in front of Starscream. It should have been later and secret.

He didn't like this. Anxiety balled in his tanks. They had gone down several floors, and now were in dark, dank corridors. No one had been here in a while, no one had disturbed the dust save in a single path, and glitchmice ran chittering into the dark.

There could hardly be a better place for an assassination.

Optimus wouldn't do that, would he?

They'd had their differences, but Optimus wouldn't stand by as Megatron was hurt, would he? Would he?

Megatron wasn't sure.

"Where are you taking me?" Optimus's only response was a firm tug on the stasis cuffs.

Megatron tried to slow, to dig in his heels, but Optimus pulled him along anyway. "Optimus, what the frag is this?"

"We have to check you for shadowplay," said Optimus at last. "Soundwave will use his telepathy and make sure everything's working as it should be. We can't risk it, and what you did was so uncharacteristic..."

Megatron heard Soundwave's name and stopped dead. That was—that was worse than torture or imprisonment or execution. "No," he said. "Don't. You can't."

"Megatron," Optimus's attitude was exasperated, "I've had it done myself. It's a little unpleasant, but it won't even hurt."

"Stay out of my head!" Megatron heard the panic in his own voice and couldn't even find it in himself to be embarrassed. "Lock me up, kill me, just stay out of my head!"

"This isn't optional," said Optimus coldly. "You killed a mech. Whatever your reasons, what you did was wrong. Now, we need to be sure you're not a further danger to the Decepticons, or the refugees under our care."

"And yet Starscream got away with killing Jazz!" Megatron staggered as Optimus yanked him forward. He stopped again, planting himself so he wouldn't be easily knocked off balance again. "Are the rules different for Starscream, Optimus? I offlined a mech I knew was a continuing danger. Even if I did believe his story, which I don't, is it so different from mine? What makes me unbelievable?"

"Don't make this harder than it has to be," said Optimus, and kicked Megatron's back leg out from under him. He staggered. Optimus got behind him, throwing him off balance and driving him forward. Starscream came up to his side, grabbing his other arm, and pulled.

"Stop!" Megatron thrashed. "Optimus, stop! Don't do this!" He didn't know how Soundwave's telepathy worked. He'd be flayed open and bare again. There'd be someone in his mind.

The Autobots. Oh, Primus, the Autobots. Trusting. Reliant on him. He knew all their secrets.

They dragged him down the hall, even though he fought, but he was cuffed and inexperienced and Optimus, at least, knew how to handle an uncooperative prisoner. He clawed at whatever of them he could reach; when one of Starscream's wings came in range he snapped at it, but Starscream flicked it out of range just in time.

The panic boiled high in his intake. He knew his optics were sparking with alarm and terror, he could feel the cleanser routines trying to online. The terror was complete, it swallowed the world and clenched his tanks and set his fuel pump hammering so hard it felt like he couldn't vent. They were going to put someone else in his mind. They were going to let someone *in his mind*.

"STOP!" but they weren't listening. "STOP!" and it came out something near a sob. "Please, Optimus. Don't do this."

He drew a hiccupping vent. There was an open door ahead. A light within. He had to get away from them before they reached it. He struggled, throwing himself forward and to the side, and they caught him. Maybe someone would have heard him calling for help. Maybe he could get at the communicator on Optimus's hip. He tried sending a ping to Prowl, but it was blocked. All

things he'd tried before. The same results. "Optimus—you're better than this. Don't do this." He tried to stop again, but they anticipated him and yanked to send him lurching forward again. "Optimus—Lord Optimus—*please!*"

"He's done the same for me," said Optimus. "He won't hurt you, Megatron, stop being ridiculous."

"It's my mind," he said, not sure how else to make Optimus understand. "It's my *mind*, it's *mine*, I don't want anyone else in it ever again, I *can't*. Optimus, please, please, *stop*." His voice had gone shrill and grating and terrified, and now there was optical lubricant flowing down his face. He'd thought his terror was complete when Trepan had ripped off his helmet and jabbed needles into his brain again—but the Matrix hummed its own alarm against his flaring, panicking spark, and he knew it couldn't save him this time. After everything, even the comparatively minor horror of someone just looking at his mind was more than he could bear.

Jazz. Prowl. The fledgling Autobots. Soundwave's telepathy would uncover them all. They'd force him to betray them. "Have Ratchet examine me. Rung. *Just stay out of my head! PLEASE!*"

It would kill him. He was pretty sure it would kill him. He hoped it would kill him. He didn't want anyone there ever again. "Optimus—"

But they were through the door and Optimus threw him into the room, sending him sprawling across the chair there. The inhibitor made him too slow to pull away before they strapped him to it. He struggled as much as he could, weak and ineffective, and then lay there gasping. He was shaking too hard to move. It wasn't just the stasis cuffs.

"Don't do this," he said again, something pathetic and quiet, and looked from Optimus to Starscream. There was a sort of horror in the Seeker's optics and for a moment he felt a flare of totally unreasonable hope. Then he realized it was only a show for Optimus's benefit, even as Starscream said, "We're worried about you, Megatron. Cold-blooded murder isn't like you. You're a medic."

"He killed a mech in front of me," said Megatron, but it fell on deaf ears.

Optimus was looking uncertain as well. "Starscream, is there another way...?"

"There is," said Megatron, openly pleading. "Ratchet. Rung. Someone who can look at a processor—the Matrix *healed me*, Optimus, it made me myself again, no one *can* shadowplay me again. Please, you don't have to do this, Optimus, this isn't you."

Optimus wasn't listening to him. Optimus was looking at Starscream.

"None that I'd care to trust," said Starscream. "He's the Prime. Think of the damage he could do if he were compromised. We'd have fought this whole war for nothing. The alternative would be lifelong imprisonment or execution—we can't trust him otherwise. No matter his personal fears, this is better. This is kinder."

It was useless, they wouldn't listen. "Fragging kill me!" Megatron snarled, throwing himself against the restraints. Desperation and rage gave him strength. Not enough. There was even a strap across his forehead. He couldn't bite. "That would be kinder!"

"Megatron, it's not that bad. He won't hurt you."

Megatron snarled at him. "You consented!"

There were footsteps in the hall. Megatron stared at the open door. He felt his trembling increase, rattling his plating against the chair. He looked up at Optimus. Tried once again. "Optimus, please. Don't do this. Please."

Optimus was silent, and Soundwave stepped into the room. Megatron cringed back into the chair. "I did not consent to this," he said. Maybe Soundwave would listen. He didn't know the mech well, but maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't be happy to use his powers like this. "Please, stop. *Don't do this.*"

"Mental examination: necessary," said Soundwave.

Megatron closed his optics. His cheeks were sticky with the optical cleanser. If resisting would kill him, he would die gladly. He'd die protecting his mind, and his Autobots.

"Primus might forgive you for this," he said aloud. "But I won't. Any of you. I won't."

A touch settled around his mind. He hardened his defenses. He pushed his worst memory to the surface, which was easy: the memory of Trepan's needles rose easily, buoyed by the feeling of another invading mind. He pushed it to the surface, sobbing with its horror. He hoped that would be enough.

Optimus didn't know how much more he could watch. Megatron strained against the chair's straps so hard that he was denting his own plating. His frame shook with his sobs, and there was such a nakedly terrified, openly helpless expression on his face that it made Optimus's spark cringe. He'd whimpered, once, when Soundwave first touched his mind. Optimus wasn't even sure that he'd been aware of whimpering. He'd been too far gone in the horror, optics white and sparking with it.

"Megatron: resisting," said Soundwave, and his voice, too, was distressed. "Megatron: believes resistance will kill him. Megatron: resisting anyway. Soundwave: attempting to mitigate damage, but Megatron's resistance: renders mitigation difficult."

Megatron made a horrible little whining noise of desperation and pain. "Stop. Please. Please. Stop."

"Megatron: cease resistance. Pain will decrease. Soundwave: no desire to harm Megatron."

"I'd rather you kill me!" There was no doubt of his sincerity; the scream was raw pain. "Just kill me, frag you, it'll be kinder!"

"Soundwave: *will not* kill Megatron." Soundwave winced, and said by way of explanation, "Megatron: attempting to shield mind with memories. Shadowplay. Attempted assault by Overlord."

Megatron's claws dug runnels in the chair. "I'd rather *die*," he gasped. "The only way you're going to get in there is if I'm *dead!* *Get out of my head!*"

Soundwave's shoulders trembled. His visor flared. Megatron screamed, something that trailed into a high thin keening sound, and sagged.

For a moment Optimus feared he was indeed dead. Then Soundwave said, "Resistance, overcome."

Megatron was silent, save for the chiming rattle of his plating against the chair. He'd begun to leak; a thread of red liquid trickled down his face with his optical lubricant. The pink of energon stained the corner of his mouth. His optics were open now, blank and bright. His vents came hard and fast and ragged, like those of a wounded creature. Occasionally, he hiccuped on a sob; optical lubricant flowed freely down his face as he wept, optics staring at nothing.

"Megatron: free of shadowplay," said Soundwave at last. "Committed murder of own accord."

"Thank Primus," said Optimus softly. He looked at the shuddering wreckage in the chair and tasted regret. It had been necessary, but he could barely imagine the terror that could push a mech to fight like that against Soundwave's carefully gentle examination. How could he ever apologize?

Soundwave raised a hand. "Wait. Other information Megatron seeks to conceal."

Megatron's head moved slightly in denial. His vents sputtered. His optics flickered, and Soundwave flinched as if he'd been struck, but kept speaking.

"Jazz: alive."

"What?" said Starscream, horror in his voice.

"Megatron: consulted with Jazz about offlining Pharma. Jazz: sought Megatron's approval. Megatron: certain Pharma was responsible for sexual assault of civilian medic Ratchet. Megatron: decided to offline Pharma prior to consulting with Optimus. Saw Optimus as unlikely to interfere, Optimus's reluctance as betrayal of trust. Doubted Optimus would provide assistance."

Optimus felt as if someone had dropped a ball of ice into his tank. "What?" Megatron—Megatron couldn't be capable of that!

"Upon Optimus's refusal to train refugees, Megatron engaged combat specialists Ironhide and Impactor to train refugees himself." A pause. "Refugees more competent than apparent to Decepticon investigations. Refugees: organizing into an army. Megatron: commander of that army."

Optimus stared at the mech's shaking form with new horror. He'd been blind. How had he been so blind? How could Megatron—a medic, a miner, whose greatest political act had been his own assassination—contrive something like this?

"Megatron and Jazz: built an intelligence force, Autobot Special Operations. Intelligence force: ostensibly to obtain information pertinent to medical aid activities. Reality: spied on Decepticon military activity, actively recruited Decepticons to Autobot cause under Megatron."

Dead silence. Optimus looked sidelong at Starscream, who stood staring at Megatron with an expression of horror.

"Megatron and Prowl: foresaw a split between Decepticons and civilians. Resolved to ensure civilian capability of defense when split occurred. Evacuations planned by Prowl. Military response and cover by Megatron. Active recruitment among Decepticon forces, by Megatron. List of conspirators follows."

Optimus listened numbly to name after name, many of whom he'd trusted. How could Megatron do this? How could *they* do this?

Megatron in a short time had destroyed the Decepticons from within, hollowed out their cause, had done it with an easy smile and a friendly manner. It was only luck they were learning of it now. Megatron hadn't fought Soundwave so hard because of trauma, but to keep his treachery secret.

Megatron himself lay in the chair, optical lubricant and unnamable fluids running down his face. He shuddered sometimes with something like a sob—regret at seeing his plans dashed, most likely. Optimus stared at him and the misery, the betrayal, rushed into his spark, leaving him coldly angry. For the first time, he looked down on the mech who had inspired him on this path, and he felt nothing. No warm affection. No concern. Not even pity.

The fusion cannon on his arm hummed, circuits activating at the heat of his anger.

He stared down at Megatron's trembling frame, his blankly staring optics, and it was an effort not to execute him there. Soundwave and Starscream would likely back him. But he was better than Megatron. They needed to round up all Megatron's conspirators, bring them to trial, show the world what Megatron had tried to do, and make them pay for it, fairly. Publicly.

This mech had led Ratchet away, Ironhide, Prowl—Prowl, of whom he'd thought so much better! *Friends*. And he'd had the nerve to lecture as if Optimus himself were the one remiss.

Megatron hadn't seemed to notice Soundwave had withdrawn; he stared blankly into space, still weeping. It had to be an act. Soundwave was gentle.

"Get that list distributed," Optimus said at last. "They must have feared he'd break. We only have a little time to catch the rest of them."

"Yes, Lord Optimus."

Megatron coughed weakly, and raised his helm. He still looked bad, his optics overbright. "You're not even going to ask why I did it?" he asked. His voice was raw, a mere rasp.

"I don't care why you did it," said Optimus. "I care what you did. You subverted this cause for your own pleasure. Because we didn't give you enough power."

"No," Megatron said. "No. Because you were going to make the Autobots servants. Because I saw no one speaking for the helpless, and so I did. And you didn't listen." He coughed again. "Today, you've shown your true colors." He raised his helm, and his energon-spattered grin was deranged and terrible. "You're a Functionist, Orion Pax. You've become a Functionist. You would have boxed my Autobots away to slave for you, and now you rip my mind asunder to satisfy your own crooked justice. Because as soon as I moved against your great plans, I was the enemy. No one cares what happens to the enemy. I will fight you with every ventilation in my frame... and so will my Autobots."

"I'm sure they will," said Optimus coldly. The mech before him was the real Megatron. The Megatron he'd believed in had never existed. All he could follow was his conscience now... his conscience, and his friends, and Starscream was a supportive presence next to him. "But they will find it difficult to do so within prison cells. Starscream. Soundwave. With me. We'll clean up Megatron's mess."

As they left, he paused in the door. "You thought the Matrix gave you rights over the rest of

us, Megatron," he said. "You're wrong. Cybertron makes its own destiny now, not that of a Prime."

"It wasn't a Prime's destiny I sought for it," said Megatron quietly. Optimus pulled the door closed behind him and locked it.

He was likely fine; Soundwave would have told him otherwise. But right now, Optimus couldn't find any particular concern for Megatron leaking out.

"Soundwave," he said. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"Optimus: should not apologize. Experience: was unpleasant, but uncovered a major security risk. Soundwave's assessment of Megatron Prime: correct. Megatron: inexperienced, impulsive, unreliable, idealistic. Megatron Prime: inappropriate for leadership."

"You can say that again," said Starscream. "He really fooled all of us."

"Yes," said Optimus, thinking of the willing, eagerly submissive aspect Megatron had shown him in berth, about the immensely kind young medic he'd known in the Dead End, "he certainly did."

The air duct wasn't quite big enough for the two of them, and Jazz was really, really regretting bringing First Aid along. He'd clamped a hand over the little medic's faceplate (much good it did, without a mouth there to stop, but Aid thank Primus got the message) and physically restrained him to keep him jumping out and onto Soundwave.

Aid spoke Hand, fortunately.

We can't fight all three of them, Aid. Not even with Impactor and Ironhide. We gotta wait for them to leave.

Aid shook his head against Jazz's hand, optics fixed on Megatron as he shook in the chair. *You don't know what this means to him, he said. You don't know what they're doing. He used to wake up with screaming nightmares in the Academy. From the mnemosurgery. He was terrified then and he didn't even remember it—now he DOES. Jazz, they're killing him down there.*

Why I brought you along, Jazz said. Hold on. We'll get him out. We can't right now.

They watched. It was horrible. Jazz had never seen anyone put up such a fight against Soundwave. He was both horrified and impressed.

And Optimus had the nerve to get self-righteous at the mech, throwing accusations at him, justifications, as if he couldn't see what he'd done. As if he thought Megatron's shattered trust, the way he slumped shaking in the chair, was an act. Megatron would never fake that, Jazz knew. It was too much a sacrifice of dignity.

At last, they were gone. Jazz pushed First Aid behind him and swung out of the vent. Megatron didn't even stir. For a moment, Jazz was terrified he had actually killed himself with his mad resistance to Soundwave's probing, and wondered what he should do with the Matrix then—shove it into First Aid's chest?

But no, he was still online. Jazz reached to free the inhibitor claw and Megatron made an animal noise, slamming his head backwards.

"Steady, mech," he said. "Just gonna get you loose, okay? Gotta reach for your back to do that. Aid's here. He's gonna look you over, too. You're all right. We're here, and we're gonna make sure you're all right, and then we'll go get the fraggers, okay?"

"Jazz?" rasped Megatron, with a voice stripped to nothing by screams.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's me and Aid. You're okay. We're going to make it okay."

As soon as he was released, Megatron groped blindly for First Aid, seized an arm, and toppled out of the chair to land on his knees in front of the medic. It brought their heads to the same level. Aid carefully patted Megatron's shoulder, and Megatron made a soft whine and buried his face in Aid's chest.

Jazz didn't like that. Megatron didn't *do* casual touch. Megatron didn't like exposing the back of his helm.

"I'm going to scan you, all right?" said Aid softly, and did. Let out a deep vent of relief. "They didn't do you any permanent damage. Only a little disorientation. You fried some circuits, but your repair nanites can take care of them," he told Megatron gently. "You'll be all right physically, just take it easy on yourself."

Megatron shuddered.

"And we're here," said Aid. "We can spend as much time here as you need, okay? Then we'll go help everyone."

Megatron lay crumpled in the chair and shook. There was no one to pretend for right now. No one to sneer at, no one to act unaffected to. So he lay and shook with horror and pain. The inside of his head felt scoured. His helm throbbed. His optics hurt, there was energon in his mouth, his audials rang and buzzed.

He felt open. Like Soundwave had shattered the gates of his mind and now they swung in the wind. He didn't feel alone in his own head. He whimpered softly to himself, unable to even bring his hands up to cover his head, his neck. He wanted to. It was the only way he could remember to stop feeling this way.

He could still feel Soundwave in his head, the ghost of an invasive presence. There were still ribbons of agony in his mind, a phantom pressure on his brain. He felt afraid to *think*, because his thoughts didn't feel private.

It was unbearable. It was as bad as the first time being shadowplayed, but he'd forgotten it then, and there'd been a sort of relief there. Lying here in the full awareness of his violation, he didn't know what to do.

And then Jazz was there, and First Aid, and before he'd processed it properly he was out of the chair and clinging to First Aid, the most familiar presence in that horrible room. They were murmuring platitudes at him, he realized. They didn't do much good, other than remind him he

wasn't alone. Gave him something else to think about, aside from the horrible lack of privacy within his own mind. He focused on venting, heard from a distance First Aid say he was physically unharmed. That was good. Optimus had to be stopped.

He vented, and tried to pull himself back together, and vented again, mind flinching away from the terrible feeling of nakedness. He pushed past and over that, he tried not to reach back and feel it again. He was on delicate wobbling ground, thin as glass under shaking pedes.

He had to do this. He had to get back to his feet. He was needed.

He vented. Panic boiled just out of reach. Horror and grief and the sheer depth of the violation and anger too. He let the anger leak through. Nothing else. Vent. Vent. Vent. It might feel like there was someone in his head, but Soundwave was gone. That was a sensor ghost. A terrible memory. But a memory.

"We can get Ironhide and Impactor to carry him," said First Aid, sounding worried.

Vent. Let go of First Aid's arm. Don't look at what's behind you, you'll shatter. You can't shatter. There are things to do.

Slowly, he loosened his fingers. Slowly, he lifted his head. He looked at the door.

"Megatron?" said Jazz, worried.

"The Autobots," said Megatron. "I have to warn my Autobots."

Vent. Vent. Get your feet under you.

He staggered upright.

"Let me clean your face," said First Aid.

"No," he said. "Let everyone see what they did." He took a step.

Vent. Take a step.

"Prowler started the evacuation as soon as he heard," said Jazz. "Most of the Autobots are out."

"Good," said Megatron, and managed to stagger out the door. His gyros were still revolting. A stress reaction, he told himself, and kept going with a hand on the wall.

"We'll get you back to the base," said First Aid. "Someone will have a transport. Prowl picked one of the new sites at random. Probably one of the ones you asked not to be told about. It's going to be all right, Megatron."

"It is not going to be all right," Megatron said. He found the strength to push away from the wall.

"Mech, don't be so hard on yourself," said Jazz. "I've never seen *anyone* put up such a fight against Soundwave. Frag, I don't think I could do as well. And we've compartmentalized. You didn't know everything; you couldn't give everything away. You didn't let anyone down. And we're not fragged because of it."

"It is not going to be *remotely* all right," Megatron repeated, taking another few uneven steps. "Optimus is going to go up there and arrest people. He's going to try to crush the Autobots. It

is not going to be all right, because the only place we go from here is *war*."

"Um, yeah?" said Jazz. "Would have thought Starscream skewering me made that inescapable. The Decepticons were never going to respect us as an independent entity. You just... hurried things along a little."

Megatron's mouth set in a grim line and he moved faster.

He'd known something like this could happen. He'd given the orders he had because of that. But right now, he was startled and pained. He hadn't expected it to happen so fast.

He hadn't expected Optimus to give Soundwave permission to *violate his mind*. He hadn't expected Soundwave to *cooperate*.

He was mostly steady when they found Ironhide and Impactor.

"Frag, you look rough," said Impactor, and offered him a hand, which he tried to ignore. "What did they do to him?"

"Soundwave," said Jazz, grim.

Impactor snarled low in his throat. "We'll get the fraggers for that."

"Let's get up there quick," said Ironhide. "Optimus and his buddies came pounding through a few minutes ago. My bet's that they're going for the base."

"They're determined to arrest the ringleaders," said Megatron, and staggered. Both Ironhide and Impactor grabbed him, steadying him. "They've got the names from me."

"Yeah, by letting that creep Soundwave into your head," growled Ironhide, and started walking. "I know you can hold your own, mech, just it's gonna get a little rough up there, and you're looking plenty rough already. Stick with us, huh?"

"Give me a weapon and I'll do more than that," said Megatron, with a firmness he didn't feel.

The Decepticon base was nearly deserted. Probably all over fighting the Autobots, Megatron thought grimly, and followed Ironhide and Impactor. Jazz was silent at the back, as was First Aid, except First Aid murmured, "I hope Ratchet actually left when he was supposed to. I don't want him caught in this."

Which was funny, coming from tiny, devoutly pacifistic First Aid. Ratchet was probably much better at holding his own in a fight. But Megatron said nothing.

He was more or less walking on his own by the time they reached the base. Ironhide and Impactor looked at him and shrugged. "Might as well give you something to defend yourself with," said Impactor. "I got a spare energy axe. Don't need it 'cause of the harpoon."

"He's a better shot," said Ironhide, and handed over his ion cannon. "Here, gimme the axe. Ready?"

Megatron nodded. His face itched, the fluids on it still tacky, and Ironhide kicked the door open.

Chaos.

Autobot command—at least the parts that hadn't been evacuated yet—was pinned down in the center of the room. Many of the makeshift shelters had been trampled or burned. Optimus stood in front of them.

"Autobots," and at least he was using their name, "my fellow Cybertronians, though a few malcontents have attempted to stir discontent between us, we don't need to do this. We don't need to turn on each other. Stand down. You will be treated fairly, even the ringleaders. We must stand together or we will most assuredly fall."

"Where's Megatron?" someone yelled—probably Cliffjumper. "We're not doing *anything* without him!"

"Megatron is under arrest. He murdered a mech," said Optimus, and stepped smartly to the side as someone threw a brick at him. "There is no need for further violence!"

"You probably *killed him*," said someone else, and Megatron realized Prowl, who usually would have been reining the enraged Autobots in, wasn't doing any such thing. It had to be a distraction, intended to get the rest of them out.

"Yeah and now you want Prowl!" said another voice. "Gonna kill him too, Decepticon?" *Decepticon* was a sneer, and Megatron felt something in him strengthen. Optimus should have listened to him when he'd warned about the growing resentment about the treatment of the Autobots at Decepticon hands.

The Autobots started to jeer. Around them, the refugee camp smoldered.

Megatron remembered distantly walking away from Ratchet, Ratchet's clinic burning behind him. Hard hands on his arms, enemies around him, his wrists in cuffs, helpless to do anything about it.

His home was burning again but this time, he was free and his friends were behind him. He hefted the ion cannon—considerably sized for Ironhide, it was possible for him to wield one handed—and looked down into the crowd.

The pain of Soundwave's violation receded a little. He knew what to do. He picked out Optimus in the crowd and aimed.

"I'm going to do something a little foolish," he advised the mecha around him. Then he fired.

The blast kicked up molten steel around Optimus's feet and he stepped back fast, tracking where the shot had come from. He raised his fusion cannon. "Megatron."

Megatron ignored him, proceeding down the steps from the catwalk, ion cannon in one hand, other spread wide. "Cybertronians," he said, pitching his voice so it boomed over the crackle of burning materials. "I said this to you once. I say it again. *You are being deceived.*"

The Autobots cheered.

"The Decepticons are not your friends. They are not your allies. They are not your protectors. Despite our advice, despite my urgings, every warning had been ignored, and they stand upon the precipice of tyranny." He paused for that to sink in. "They will not be content with being the downfall of the Functionists—no, no by his close-minded stubbornness, his inability to hear legitimate criticism, Lord Optimus," and he enjoyed too much putting a sneer into the *Lord*, "has led them to become the *successors* of the Functionists."

"Megatron," said Optimus, admonishing. His fusion cannon was still raised. Megatron paused on the last step.

"Look what they have done to me," he said, still ignoring Optimus. There were others to play to here. The Decepticons. His Autobots. He gestured to his face.

Someone behind the barricade gasped.

"Damn you, Optimus, what the *frag* did you do?" demanded someone, obviously Ratchet.

"They've *tortured* him!" spat another mech.

There was a snarl of rage at that, and for a moment Megatron felt soothed by it. He had people willing to avenge the wrongs committed on him.

"Not by their permissive definition, no," he said. "But Lord Optimus and Commander Starscream held me down while Soundwave violated my mind. They did this though I fought them. Despite my pleas for them to stop, for I foolishly thought them my friends, they flayed my mind open, and stripped the knowledge of our desire for independence from it. And then they left me, to live or to die, they did not care." He was striding toward them now, his rage a hard shield against the horror his own words dragged up. Declaiming this, denouncing them—in a way it was freeing, but he was grasping the sword by the blade; for all the power of the words, for all the rush of defiant, freeing rage they gave him, he could feel them cutting into his spark all the same. "They violated the mind of an unwilling mech, and it was not the first time. How many of you have they done this to, my brethren? How many of you have stayed silent because it was supposedly not that bad? Stay silent no longer!"

He took the cannon in both hands and leveled it at Optimus.

"A mech's mind is his sanctuary," he said. "The spark is an unknown thing, ringed with superstition. But his mind—that is the one thing in a world of change we should be able to retreat to, to shape, to determine. The Functionists committed blasphemy of the foulest sort when they found a way to torture a mech's mind until he thought their thoughts. And now! Now, Lord Optimus uses his pet intelligence officer to open the minds of his opponents!"

He came still closer. Optimus stood there. He didn't look alarmed. He looked outraged. Good. He could be fought.

"They did this to me," Megatron said, "because I saw something they didn't want me to. I saw one of Starscream's cronies murder one of us. I saw him *laugh*. And Starscream dismissed it, as if that mech's life were worth nothing. This, too, we have seen before. From the Functionists. I could not let us return to that. So I killed the mech. I killed him, because he was a danger to all of us. Because if he laughed after killing a defenseless miner, he would laugh after killing one of you. So the Decepticon lord, our *savior* from the *Functionists*, decided to violate my mind in revenge, and took from it the knowledge of our defiance."

He looked around, pointedly. At the flames. At the wreckage of the base. At the penned Autobots.

"Defiance," he said. "Not violence. Our plans for a better life.

"And *this* was his response."

He turned his gaze to Optimus, ion cannon still leveled at the mech. "You are not fit to lead," he said. "I warned you. I warned you that you were creating a lower class based on function

—just as the Functionists had done. I warned you that allowing your favorites to kill without accountability encouraged them to do it as they pleased. I warned you to incorporate the Autobots and Decepticons, to treat everyone as equal. I warned you about Starscream."

"Starscream is not the problem, Megatron," said Optimus, leveling the fusion cannon at him. "Your own insatiable lust for power is."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Megatron. "For a moment I thought you were the one to blithely step into Overlord's place after I offlined him."

That stopped Optimus for a moment. "You murdered him?"

"I killed him in self-defense. Or would you have preferred to find me in one of his back rooms of spare parts?" Megatron tilted his head and smirked a little. "Though seeing what you've done since... perhaps you would have. You've truly stepped into his place, in every way."

Optimus's optics went from startled to hard. "It was necessary."

"So was this," said Megatron. "You were ignoring them, Optimus. They had no one to protect them. So I did."

"You are deceiving them," said Optimus.

"They know me better than you do," countered Megatron. "Should I really be worried about that accusation? Here you stand, listening to Starscream alone as you build an army of simpering toadys. What real change can you create when you won't even listen to a differing opinion, Optimus? Your complacency has killed your own revolution."

He walked past Optimus carefully, rotating to keep the cannon on him. "We'll be going now," he said.

"So you're just *leaving*?" said a new voice, and Megatron glanced to his side. Deadlock. "You're just leaving, with those pampered idiots? They're just whining because they can't push us around anymore!"

"No, because they dislike being pushed around as much as we do," said Megatron. "You didn't claw your way up from the bottom only to step on the faces of other mechs, did you, Deadlock?"

"That's not what it is and you know it," spat Deadlock.

"It looks that way from here, Deadlock," said Megatron, keeping his voice even. "You've come up in the world, haven't you? From the mech being beaten by Overlord's bullies to doing the beating. I hope, one day, you find your way again."

Deadlock snarled at him. "Moralizing fragger. You started down with us and you'll end down with us, no matter how hard you try to cover yourself with guilt now. Don't you deny your past."

Megatron gave him a hard level stare, then looked back at Optimus. "Well? What will it be, *Lord* Optimus? Will you let us go, or will we see just how robust the Decepticon Cause is without its beloved leader?"

Optimus stood where he was and glared.

Megatron swung the cannon to Soundwave. "Or what about its intelligence officer?"

That got a reaction. Optimus's fusion cannon powered down. "Don't kill him, Megatron," he said.

"Order your Decepticons to stand down," said Megatron, "and let us—all of us—go. You've already given me good reason to offline Soundwave here and now. Don't give me a better one."

"You can't fool them forever, Megatron Prime," said Optimus.

Megatron tipped him a fanged grin. "I'd say the same to you, Lord Optimus." The smile fell from his face. "You will let us go. You won't follow us. We'll let you be if you let us be."

"You're traitors to the cause," snarled Starscream. "You don't see a way to seize power here, so you betrayed us!"

"I could say the same of you," said Megatron. "He'll stab you in the back, Optimus."

"That's enough!" snapped Optimus. "You see your own flaws in everyone."

Megatron's back foot touched the barricade. "Ready to leave, Prowl?"

"Absolutely, sir," said Prowl. "My weapons are also aimed at Soundwave. The edge of the barricade is twelve meters to your left."

"Thank you," said Megatron, and moved until there was empty air behind him. He heard the clatter of limbs, the movement of air as his Autobots climbed over the barricade to stand with him. He didn't look away from Optimus.

"On your order, sir," said Prowl.

Megatron nodded curtly. "Thank you Prowl."

He dared a glance around. The path was clear. There weren't many Autobots, only a handful. The rest, he presumed, had been evacuated. He raised his voice.

"Autobots, *roll out!*"

He covered their retreat, only transforming when he was out of line of sight with Soundwave. Even then, he kept his turret aimed at the road behind them.

If the Decepticons wanted his Autobots, they'd have to go through Megatron.

End Act III

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so maybe I should have split this up into like, four chapters. But I couldn't find a good stopping point.

Also, since the fall of Tumblr, I've moved to Dreamwidth (as MlleMusketeer) and

Pillowfort (as the same). I hope to see you there; my tumblr is no longer checked! (so if you tag me in anything there I fear I won't see it unless you link here or to one of those other sites).

See you for Part 4!

Act IV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"We're being followed."

Jazz looked up at Megatron, a large still figure black against the night sky, optics glowing like sullen coals. He stood with hands clasped at the small of his back, staring intently at the darkness, while behind them the cheer and light of the camp continued unabated.

"Who do you think it is?"

"One of Soundwave's cassettes," said Megatron. "The cat. He never did tell me his name."

"Ravage," said Jazz, and stared out into the darkness as well. "You think he's just keeping an eye on us?"

"So far."

"Assassination ain't Ravage's style," said Jazz. "He's an infiltrator by trade. Our problems'll come when he lets his handlers know where we're headed."

Megatron hummed. "You think they'll attack so soon?"

"We're another two days of driving out from the nearest big city that might take us in," said Jazz. "We're tired. We've barely rested for the last three days. Yeah, if I were Optimus, we'd be looking real tempting."

"I would like to believe he would leave us alone," said Megatron. "But I doubt he will. His lack of control over us frightens him."

"Frightens Starscream, more like," said Jazz.

"Optimus, too," said Megatron. "Go speak with Prowl and get us a guard on the camp for tonight. A bigger one. I want Ravage to know we're paying attention."

"You got it," said Jazz. He turned away, but not without a worried glance at Megatron's broad back. He looked—stooped. Tired. As if he'd aged a century in the last three days.

Little wonder.

The memory of Megatron's desperate pleas, his sobs, wouldn't leave him. They hurt his spark in a way he wasn't accustomed to. He'd seen horrible things. He'd done horrible things. It was all a part of who he was. He'd been built for subterfuge. Failed to make the noble family who'd commissioned him happy, been employed by the Enforcers after being put out on the streets. The memories weren't great, especially of those hungry months between the two, and Jazz figured he'd seen his fair share of slag.

Megatron was Prime. Megatron had an entire army willing to take up arms for his sake. To revenge his agony.

Why was Jazz taking it personally?

There Megatron stood, still and watching. Deep into the night, a silent sentinel with his back to the comfort of his comrades. Jazz should be calling him an idiot, bullying him back to camp to refuel and be nagged by Ratchet into better caring for himself. Jazz should be treating him like any other mech. No metaphysical bauble should be enough to get *him* to bend the knee. But he paused, looking at his silhouette, and something stopped him. Megatron seemed incredibly unapproachable, like even his pain was too big for a mere mortal to dare. In that moment, Jazz felt that he could no more tell Megatron to get his aft back to camp and fueled and rested than he could tell Primus Himself to take it easy for a day.

He shook his head at that. Megatron was a mech, same as him. If he was going to go talk to Prowl before pulling Megs off watch, that was just because Ravage was a serious threat.

Megatron watched the darkness. There was a way of unfocusing one's optics, of watching not for anything particular, but for movement, the stir of shadow on shadow, a shape that didn't fit the rest of the landscape. He'd spotted Ravage several times, only a flicker of movement where there should have been none. He knew Ravage knew he was there. He wanted Ravage to know he was there. That the camp was defended.

And he didn't want to talk to anyone.

He hurt too much to talk to anyone without them noticing, and he couldn't bear anyone's pity. He'd flung the horror of what Optimus and Soundwave had done to him in their faces, and now everyone knew, and he bitterly regretted that. They looked at him with concern. They offered him energon, they offered to take his watches, they offered their rage. None of it would help. None of it would touch the deep anger and violation in his spark and brain. None of it would make him feel alone in his own head any faster.

He was pretending to be unaffected, hoping they would lose interest, so he could curl into himself and wait for the pain to pass. They were moving, putting miles and days between themselves and Kaon and the Decepticons. That helped. Ravage, out in the darkness, watching, did not.

If he stood here, on guard, Optimus and Soundwave and Starscream would know they hadn't hurt him as badly as they'd thought.

As badly as they had.

Pain passed. He had to wait. To bear it.

He wanted his thoughts to be private again. Sometimes it would be a little better, and he would vent, glad it was over—and then something would remind him of it and he'd be back, pain making daggers around his spark, his processor aching, and the all-encompassing feeling of someone *watching*, inescapable. If there had been some deeply private place, he might have crept off and let the optical lubricant flow once more, weep in the hopes it would at least release some of this terrible feeling. But there wasn't, and he'd customized overrides so his frame wouldn't do that without his permission.

He'd trusted Optimus.

He was a fool.

Optimus's face kept coming back to him. There had been that terrible pity, and then—then

the resentment. The rage. The betrayal, as if he hadn't betrayed Megatron first, as if Megatron's suspicion had given him the right to do this.

Megatron had interfaced with him. Had trusted him not only with that intimacy, but with his submission. Long ago, he had been ashamed of that. Feared that if he had showed it, his partner would never look at him again the same way—that his partner would assume he would submit in every way, content to be gentle and retiring and compliant. He wanted to be none of those things in the waking world; they filled him with a very deep disgust that made the temptation to submit all the sweeter.

To not be responsible for his desires. To take time to satisfy his body, and not do the work he hoped would save sparks. To not feel guilty for what he wanted.

He closed his optics. He'd given in to that desire. To lose himself, lose his grief for Terminus in the pleasure of rough fragging, to have a mech he trusted at his back and this was the price of it.

Optimus had assumed his submission meant submission in all things, and his very spark felt sullied by that.

He should never have trusted Optimus. This is where it had led them. And Optimus had handed him to Soundwave, as if Megatron had given him dominion over his spark and mind when he'd submitted with his frame.

The thought made him want to scrub and claw at his plating, as if that would make him feel clean again.

Optimus had demanded he open his mind to Soundwave, as if that mattered no more than his frame.

It's not like you, Megatron.

What had Starscream known? What had Optimus boasted to him?

He forced his optics open again. It didn't matter. They were his enemies now. They were behind him. If he ever had to deal with them again, he'd have a weapon in hand, and if he killed them, it would be unequivocally the right thing to do.

It shouldn't matter anymore.

He didn't feel alone in his own head.

He longed to feel alone in his own head.

He stared out into the darkness, watching for the flickering movement that was Ravage.

Maybe, the next time the mech showed his head, he'd shoot him. Maybe, that'd make him feel a little better.

"I'm worried about him."

Ratchet glanced sidelong at Jazz. "You're hardly ever worried about anything."

"Yeah," said Jazz. He met Ratchet's gaze. "He's just...standing there. I don't think he's recharged much. He's hardly fueling. He's not talking to anyone. You know him better than anyone—is this what he usually does after trauma?"

"I don't have a fragging clue," said Ratchet. He finished his very small ration of energon. "I knew him when he was so badly shadowplayed, it was a wonder he could put two words together. Yeah, he was traumatized—but his reactions were probably totally different."

"Can you go talk to him?" pressed Jazz. "Please? He knows you better than anyone." He leaned close. "Ratchet, he basically collapsed on First Aid when we got him out of there. I'm worried."

Ratchet levered himself up. "Don't have to tell me twice," he said, and went to find Megatron.

Megatron was still standing at the edge of the camp, probably where Jazz had left him. Ratchet sighed. "Refuel, kid."

When Megatron didn't respond, he put the cube in the mech's hand. Megatron, loathe to waste fuel, took it and began to drink reflexively.

"So," said Ratchet. "I wish them joy of each other."

"What?" said Megatron, startled.

"Optimus and Pharma," said Ratchet. "Pharma fragging stayed. Not really a surprise. Was Jazz really trying to kill him on your orders?"

Megatron looked down at him, then away. There was a certain amount of guilt in that gesture.

"Idiot," said Ratchet.

"It was more of an agreement than an order," said Megatron. "I hoped to talk Optimus into keeping him far away from you. Jazz had contingency plans if I failed; I did not ask carefully after them, as I did suspect what they were. I...suppose you might want an apology."

"I ought to," said Ratchet, levelly. He didn't look at Megatron, because part of him was all too aware of what a relief it would have been if Pharma had died. "Since when are you so comfortable killing people, kid?"

"The enforcer's expression. Pharma's expression. I knew it. I've seen it too many times—aimed at *me*. And..." Megatron tapped his chestplates. "I saw what they can do," he said. "I lived through the deaths of every senator in that chamber; when I sleep, the Matrix slips me into the lives of others. I have felt, firsthand, what people like them do. I was willing enough to offline Overlord. At the time, you understood that. It's very much like that."

Ratchet looked away. He didn't like the thought that Pharma and Overlord were so similar. He didn't like the thought Megatron might be conflating everyone he thought he should offline with Overlord.

But there were more immediate things.

"You thought Optimus would help you."

"Then, yes," said Megatron. "I trusted him more than I realized. I thought he would do the right thing. He did not." He sighed heavily. "I thought he might believe me about the enforcer," he said softly. "The number of mecha I've seen offlined like that..." He fell silent.

"We were disposable. Worse, we were dangerous," he said after a time. "What that Decepticon did—I've *been* on the other end of that blaster. I've stood there, praying I wouldn't tremble, praying they wouldn't think it was funny to shoot me. I've watched young idiots a week off the assembly line not be so lucky. People like Optimus don't understand what *disposable* means, Ratchet. It means there's going to be no inquiry into your death. It means no one's going to notice." He looked down at the empty cube in his hand. "Like this," he flicked his fingers to dismiss the cube, "disposable. You're gone. Dead. And the world," he gestured, "is not different for it. My supervisors would have been in their full legal rights to string me up and beat me to death. To sell me to whatever aliens wanted me, for whatever purposes they wanted me. You know we're considered something of a luxury item in some markets, even miners?"

"No," said Ratchet, genuinely startled.

"Yes. Some of the bigger organic species find us attractive." Megatron shuddered, a visceral disgust. "When your supervisor talks to you, you present yourself. Hands behind your back. You slump and make yourself small. So they won't be scared of you. If they are, they can do anything they want to defend themselves."

His face set, grim. "I did not suffer what I did, I did not give that speech or sacrifice myself to see that happen again. To see that look in a mech's eyes as he decides to take a life that won't matter, and to do nothing. To be silent as he laughed. I should have been more careful. But I cannot regret my actions."

He looked at Ratchet. "I'm sorry. You taught me to preserve life. You taught me how to save it. But this...this is why I can't take the oath."

Ratchet thought he heard guilt in that. He put an awkward hand on Megatron's arm. "I... can't say I'm glad that you're offlining people," he said. "But I think I can understand your reasons a bit better." He wanted to be angry about Pharma. But his memories of what Pharma had done, his visceral fear of the mech, boiled to the surface and kept him quiet. Besides, Megatron was standing here, silent and in pain. When given a choice between Megatron and Pharma, Ratchet knew who needed him.

"We both know something about trusting the wrong people, don't we kid," he said. "I... I hoped better of Pharma, too. I feel stupid for not seeing it earlier."

"There was a reason he was your conjunx, wasn't there," said Megatron softly.

"Yeah," said Ratchet, and pushed a thumb into the crease of his optic to wipe away the lubricant before it fell, "yeah, there was."

"I don't know if there was a reason I trusted Optimus," said Megatron, very quietly. "I was lonely, I suppose. Lonely, and foolish."

"I thought he was a good mech," said Ratchet. "Wouldn't have let him near you otherwise."

Megatron made a small tight noise of amusement at that. "You're always protecting me."

"Yeah."

"I'm twice your mass."

"Easily. Doesn't mean you don't need someone at your back." Ratchet sighed. "Doesn't mean you need to do this alone." He looked up at Megatron. "We make mistakes, kid. Sometimes they're other people."

Megatron's mouth quirked wryly, but it was more than Ratchet had seen out of him in days, and he'd take that.

"You need to talk about what they did?" he asked quietly. "I know you're not about to tell anyone else. I'd hope you'd tell me, though. I don't want you pretending to be my guardian as well; the Matrix better not have changed that."

"I told everyone," said Megatron stiffly.

"Fine if you don't feel like repeating it," said Ratchet, raising his hands.

Megatron looked at him, long and evaluating. At last his face softened, some inner battle settled.

"I shouldn't have," he said softly. "Now they've all seen what can bring me down. That terrifies me, Ratchet."

"They're not going to use it against you," said Ratchet. "They're torqued off for you. You know you got Sunstreaker and Sideswipe to follow you? Said they didn't like the idea of babysitting a bunch of civilians, but Pit if they were going to line up with "filthy mind-rapists". Sunny's terminology, not mine."

Megatron was silent.

"They're angry it happened," Ratchet repeated. "They don't see you as weak. I've talked to some—Rung's talked to some, too—who came to me and said the Decepticons did the same thing to them. That they were upset by it, that they hadn't been recharging, and they were ashamed something so routine had done this to them. You getting out there and saying it, denouncing the practice? They realized it wasn't just them. That if it had hurt their Prime—and yeah, they're calling you *theirs*, not just the Prime—their pain was legitimate, because you were the strongest person they could imagine. That matters, Megatron. That's healing."

Ratchet looked up at him, searching for some kind of understanding. "I'm sure you hurt yourself doing this, Megatron. I'm sure telling the truth hurt you. But it was the right thing to do. It was absolutely the right thing to do, and you helped a lot of people."

Ratchet watched the frame above him relax a little, the red optics glance down at him. He was still getting used to the red optics, if he were honest with himself.

"I'm going to give you the advice you tried to give me," he said, "and I hope you're smarter than me about following it. Don't shut your friends out, Megatron. We're here for you. To help you. Because we care about you."

Megatron managed a small chuckle. "Thank you, Ratchet. I suppose I ought to try."

"Yeah, and first step? Come and rest. Jazz has sent a relief guard for you. Time to quit defending the camp all on your lonesome."

To his surprise, Megatron did follow him back to warmth and company. He hoped

Megatron saw expressions that passed over the Autobots' faces for what they were: hope, adoration, confidence. He'd shown them his wounds. They loved him for it.

He hoped Megatron could see this, because it was nothing like the medical academy. Every time he'd shown weakness there, even affection, it had been turned against him. Now, he'd admitted an immense weakness, a trauma. Of course he was frightened. Of course he was distant. He expected it to be turned on him.

He hadn't understood those expressions, it turned out, because when someone got up and handed him a rust stick with a murmured thanks, he looked both startled and horrified. The mech, a heavy labor frame, paused, looking at him.

"They did the same thing to me," he said, not looking at them, speaking short and abrupt like someone uncomfortable with what he was saying. "I was ashamed they thought I was a criminal. I didn't talk about it. Thank you for exposing the fraggers."

"Thank you," said Megatron, and that was sincere, if stunned. The mech pressed another half of a rust stick into his hand and sat down. Megatron thought about returning it, Ratchet could see the thought on his face, but didn't.

He nibbled them as they made their way along.

"They're good mecha," said Ratchet. "You were right to believe in them. And they believe in you. Because you *are* a good leader, Megatron."

Megatron blinked at him, still plainly startled, then gave him a small smile.

It was better than nothing. Ratchet smiled back and went to find him somewhere to sleep.

He floated to the surface in a green haze of pain and confusion. He'd surfaced before. He'd even talked to them before.

He wasn't sure who he was. They didn't give him a name. *You will destroy the Decepticons*, they told him, between surgeries. *I know it hurts. But it will help you destroy the Decepticons.*

They showed him video of raids. Of energon and rage and horror. He stared at them. They didn't move him. They didn't know the videos didn't move him. But they didn't understand the expressions on his face, the scarred ruin that it was.

You will destroy the Decepticons.

But now it was silent. The machines no longer beeped. There were no little scientists. He sat up and looked around the room. Nothing. The green of emergency lighting. He looked back at the slab he'd lain on. Words blinked on the computer screen.

Termination protocol initiated.

But he wasn't dead.

There had never been a name for him. They hadn't given him one. But they'd given him other things. Knowledge. How to hack a terminal. How to kill mecha with his cannon and his alt

and his claws.

And his voice.

The gift they were most proud of.

There wasn't a name for him. There wasn't an identity. He was something people poked and prodded and experimented on. He was something they made. They *trained*. His purpose was to destroy the Decepticons.

But he hated his creators. They were the ones who poked and prodded and hurt him. Now that they were gone, he could determine his own path. He would.

And the first step on it was to find these Decepticons. To join them. If his creators hated them, he would admire them.

He hacked the terminal. He accessed the recent newscasts.

He learned.

He *remembered*. A young mech falling in terrible ruin, streaming energon and the fragments of a datapad. He *remembered*, and he stared at the display, the Decepticon badge, and after a time he spoke.

"Tarn," he said, naming himself, and his neglected voice was beautiful. "I am Tarn."

Chapter End Notes

By the way, would anyone be interested in a link to the writing playlist for this fic?

Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"We have to attack." Starscream leaned over the strategy table, hands spread on its surface, pushing his face up toward Optimus's. His wings flattened against his back, annoyance and frustration both.

"I'm not attacking a group of civilians," said Optimus. "No matter what Megatron's deluded them into."

"They're not civilians," said Starscream, slowly. "They're heavily-armed enemy combatants. They've been training for months, Optimus. They're not a match for us, because they haven't had time to become that good—but we let them go now and they *will*."

"They're civilians," said Optimus firmly. "I'm not going to attack them. It would prove Megatron right. That we don't care about their lives. That we only want power. Would that be a message you'd care to send, Starscream? Because I will not send it. Those people are following Megatron in hopes of a better life. They're wrong, they're almost certainly wrong, but I won't be the one to punish them for it. Let them come back in their own time, when they realize how thoroughly he's fooled them."

Starscream started at him in disbelief.

"I think they're headed to Iacon," he said, slowly, measuring every word. "Iacon's largely intact. The nobles there simply stepped into the place of the Functionists. It was a smooth, simple transition of power, and the rest of the region remained stable. The big shipping and mining companies are now routing their product through Iacon because of that stability. In return, Iacon has required working conditions be improved significantly. That's kept the nobles in power when otherwise, they would have been thrown out on the streets. In short, they're rich. They're stable. And they stand for everything we oppose. The Autobots are headed right for them. *Think*, fraggit Optimus! You don't want a dissident faction to out join forces with Iacon! They'll be a scraplet swarm we can't push back in the stasis chamber!"

"If we must negotiate with Iacon, we must negotiate with Iacon," said Optimus. "I'm not starting another war when there's so much to be done—and if we offline Megatron, we will start a war, you may be sure of that."

"Fragging Pit," snapped Starscream, straightened up, glaring. "Why do you even keep advisors around, Optimus?" He spun on a heel and strode from the room.

Soundwave found him before he'd even gotten down the corridor. "Starscream. A word."

"You here to tell me to be nice to Megatron and his merry band of maniacs?" snapped Starscream.

"Negative," said Soundwave. "Soundwave: in full agreement with Starscream. Soundwave: concerned about ongoing Autobot threat. Starscream: has assessed implications of an alliance between Iacon and the Autobots correctly."

"Then what do you think we should do?" Starscream folded his arms. "Megatron got Optimus all jumpy. We won't be able to sneak off with a platoon one fine night and take care of it."

Optimus is paying too much attention."

"True," said Soundwave. "However, Iacon: not the safe haven Megatron imagines. Feuds: millennia old. Megatron's likely allies: House of Ambus. House of Ambus: has many enemies."

"You're saying change the battlefield," said Starscream slowly.

"Affirmative," said Soundwave. "Assassination: common."

Starscream blinked at him, startled. At last he said, "I didn't think you had the spark for it, Soundwave." He grinned. "I see a world of possibilities before us..."

"You want us to go where?"

"We have connections," said Prowl, as patiently as he could manage. "Right now, we're at the head of an army of beggars, Megatron. We can't be picky."

"Iacon?" said Megatron. "They've simply traded one set of tyrants for another. Why do you think they'll want anything to do with us?"

"Because my brother is leading the House of Ambus," said Minimus quietly. "He's sympathetic to your views, Megatron. He always has been—he's the one who managed to pass legislation to protect disposables. Minimal as it was."

"So we have one noble house on our side. That's a great comfort," said Megatron.

"Many of the newer houses owe us significant debts," said Minimus. "We don't call them in as long as they support us. It kept my brother safe from the Functionists."

"Besides, they're in an ugly position," said Prowl. "They know what the Decepticons did to us. They know there's been a split, and that the Decepticons haven't been treating the Autobots fairly. They also know that their resources will make them a tempting target. And that their meager defenses will only deter so much. They need friends, as badly as we do, and that should keep them on good behavior."

Megatron bristled. "I will not become the pet of simpering nobles!"

"I pity any that try," said Prowl, dryly.

"They're everything I fought against," said Megatron. "Mecha like me died to keep their halls gilded."

"True," said Prowl. "But do you feel that way about Mirage?"

Megatron looked away. "Mirage chose his path," he said. "And it was an honorable one. Not like these people."

"Well, you're going to have to get over yourself," said Jazz. "Things have changed. Things have changed a lot. And these people need us, yeah, but we need them, too. Unless you want to go back to Optimus and apologize? Which you certainly can do, but I can't say I'd recommend it."

Megatron fell silent. It was a clear choice. He hated it.

"I'm sorry," said Jazz. "We don't have a choice, Megatron. This really is our best option."

"Very well," said Megatron, well aware the decision was made. "We'll go to Iacon."

Megatron wasn't the only one upset by their destination, and some mecha had much more reason for it.

It took Jazz a few minutes, but he found Mirage at the edge of camp, staring into the darkness. "Hey there," he said, so as not to startle the mech.

Mirage grunted acknowledgement.

"You okay, mech?"

Mirage said nothing.

"Alrighty then. I'll rephrase that. You gonna be able to do your job, mech?"

"If you put me on a long distance scouting assignment. Maybe Kaon or Vos," said Mirage.

"No." Jazz settled next to him. "And you know better. What's the scraplet on your back?"

"I haven't seen my creators—the mecha who commissioned me—since I fled with Hound. I don't want to." Mirage folded his arms tightly, still not looking at Jazz.

"You're one of us, not one of theirs," said Jazz. "If they want to separate you, to do anything to you, they're gonna have to go through us first."

Mirage sighed. "It's not just *that*. It's...everything. I can't—I don't..."

"Beat you a lot, did they," said Jazz. Mirage looked startled. Jazz shrugged. "Remember, I was sparked in service to a noble house. I know what those fraggers get up to. How they treat their youngsters."

"I was the disappointment," said Mirage in the tones of someone hoping that frequent repetition would make it hurt less.

"There's always one. It's how to keep the others in line," said Jazz. "Mirage, I hate to put you through this, I really do. But we need you. You know this world better than any of us, and Megatron's got no fragging clue. He needs you. I know it will be hard. I know it's hard right now, and I know this is something no one should ever ask of anymech. But can you do this for your Prime?"

Mirage blinked slowly down at him, understanding dawning.

"You know him. You've seen him. He has no fragging clue. And he's about to waltz right in there, as big a target as you can imagine. And without you, he'll do it without guidance. He won't know he's torqued someone off until the knife's in his back. Mirage, I need to know if you can do this." Jazz met his optics, mouth firm, no hint of humor in his expression. "Can you protect your Prime?"

Mirage was silent for a time, the only hint he was considering the issue. Without a change in expression, he said, "Yes. I believe I can."

"Good," said Jazz, not bothering to hide his relief.

He'd expected an attack every night they were traveling. After the collapse of the Functionists, large portions of Cybertron were wasteland; people had fled from conflict between dissidents and Functionist forces, or had left because there was no way of making a life once intercity transportation slowed down.

There was nothing here. No help. In many places, no light but what their headlights and the planet itself produced, a faint glow in the direction of the Sonic Canyons, far to their west. An attack would end them.

And yet, the attack hadn't come. Ravage still followed, though Megatron no longer sat up all through the nights to watch for him. It upset Ratchet and Jazz too much.

Tonight, the last night of this travel, he had work to do.

He dipped the rag into the small container of paint thinner. He'd seen it earlier that day, dropped on the side of the road by some previous refugee. There were many items like it, things too inconvenient to justify the effort to carry them. No one fleeing for his life would think of his paint—except maybe Sunstreaker.

It lay by the side of the road, like a sign. A reminder of guilt. He would not be an oathbreaker like Pharma.

What he had done was justified.

But it had been a kill not in self-defense, and that made it different than Overlord. He'd stooped and lifted the little can, palmed it into subspace before Ratchet saw. It would hurt Ratchet, he knew.

He needed this. The insignia had felt like a burden, like a lie, with every step they took from Kaon, and it was all he could do not to pick at them. He couldn't help but feel justified in killing the other mech, but he shouldn't have done it as a medic. Ratchet was too kind to tell him as much, but he knew.

He raised the rag to his shoulder and, working swiftly and efficiently, reduced the emblem there to the gray of his armor. He did the same to the other shoulder, capped the little container, and put it back in his subspace.

It felt new. It felt different. It didn't feel good, though. He thought about his dreams in the mines. He thought about Ratchet, and his clinic, and Drift, and the warm friendliness of his little closet-like room. He wished he'd known at the time that it had been as good a time as it had been, even for someone as butchered in mind as he had been. It had simply been a good place, no matter his own illness, and he wished he could enjoy it now. Or that he could have enjoyed it before Soundwave had dug through his mind. It still hurt, he still felt a phantom pressure there.

With a start, he realized he wasn't thinking of Terminus, and guilt pricked him—when he thought of the happiest time of his function, Terminus wasn't there. Frag, he'd been *mourning* for Terminus.

But he still missed the clinic.

He mentally shook himself. He couldn't live in nostalgia and regret. There were people who relied on him. They stood and sat and recharged all around him. He knew their names and their old functions and their dreams. They were real, they were here—nothing like the readers he'd only

been able to imagine as he wrote.

He stared in the direction of Iacon.

Prowl and Jazz were right. But he still hated the idea of going begging to the very people who necessitated revolution in the first place. The Functionists were foul, yes, but they were merely the newest manifestation of an exploitative system.

Yet, what greater satisfaction than to turn that system against itself?

Their greeting in Iacon was far warmer than anyone had dared to imagine.

They reached the outskirts in the midmorning, picking their way through the broken remains of housing and shops. There had been some kind of fierce fighting here, but as they made their way into the city itself, what damages there were were actively being repaired. Mecha stopped in their work to watch them. Megatron would not have found that remarkable, but the faces of those mecha were smiling.

That was not how one greeted refugees. He said as much to Prowl.

"To them, we're not refugees," said Prowl. "We're reinforcements. Imagine facing down Optimus without an army at your back."

Megatron considered that.

"I still don't understand," he said softly. "To them, I'm filth. I crawled from the foulest bowels of the planet to reproach them. How does this not gall them? How do they see this as anything but a threat?"

"It galls them," said Prowl, just as quiet, "but they intend to use you, and that makes it bearable. Believe me, they think of you as a bribed pnumapuma—powerful, but easily controlled with the right incentives, whip or delicacies. They will seek to leash you. Our task is to make them believe they've succeeded, while you continue to do as you please."

Disgust curdled Megatron's tanks.

"Deception," said Prowl, barely audible. "You're good at it, Megatron, and we need you in this role. Open warfare is simple. This is not. Here, you succeed, or we die. You succeed, or the preening nobles get you out of the way and make one of themselves Prime. And if you succeed? This will be worth it. You'll have all of free Cybertron at your back."

Megatron was disgusted, but Prowl was right. They needed an army. Iacon was the best place to gather that army. It was the best candidate for an Autobot capital, the largest, least damaged city outside of Decepticon hands. Still, he hesitated.

He looked at this shining city and saw blood and death. It was a marvel of Cybertronian ingenuity. But its construction had been possible because of mecha like him. Disposables. Labor that went unpaid, sending in the riches of other worlds, of Cybertronian colonies, here to this buzzing hub of contented, pampered mecha. He looked at the pillars that lined grand avenues, at the precipitous towers, and wondered not about the hands that had shaped them, had bent metal to their wills, but about the scarred hands far underground that had mined them. How many of those mecha had seen what their labor had wrought?

Few. Or none. He was sure.

This was a monument to Cybertronian ambition and art.

It was also a monument to the suffering of disposables.

And the people who lived here...

He pushed that thought aside. Prowl was right. He had to play this part. For his Autobots. For his revolution, realized the way it should be, outside of Starscream's scheming. He would bear this because it must be borne. Because the alternative would be horrific.

He straightened his shoulders. He managed a smile. A gracious nod to the onlookers. As if he were, indeed, here to lend aid. Not because he had no choice.

As they made their way into the city, the construction and destroyed buildings became less frequent; these had been prioritized. The open curiosity became more so. There was the suspicion Megatron had anticipated, often from elegant, highly polished mecha who watched them with judgmental blue optics.

They didn't get much further before the welcoming party met them.

It was led by a mech who looked very similar to Minimus, though where Minimus was green, this mech was a dull gold. He was also considerably bigger, and Minimus's reserved, dignified manner was assured and almost officious on him.

"My brother," murmured Minimus. "Dominus Ambus. Head of the House of Ambus now. The smaller mech at his side is Rewind." He fell silent abruptly, as if he feared he'd said more than he ought.

"Megatron Prime," said Dominus, and extended a hand in greeting. "Welcome to Iacon. We were hoping you'd come."

Megatron took the hand, and as Dominus's fingers closed around his, so too did he feel the trap closing around himself. He'd committed to this. To these allies. The mecha who had done unforgivable things, either by moving numbers around, or by their active ignorance.

And he had no better choice.

He gave Dominus a reserved, pleased smile. "Thank you," he said, and steeled himself for what was surely to come.

Chapter End Notes

Here's the Spotify link to the playlist, which hopefully will work for most of you. I can also put together a YouTube one if necessary, but that'll take more time...

LINK:

<https://open.spotify.com/user/severeannoyance/playlist/1VNQgsp76WbrEiKApGDEto?si=uthylikWSyCZYhDdTgZpHw>

Act I: Centuries – Across The Stars

Act II: Tokyo Ghoul Main Title – Final Judgement

Act III: Everybody Wants To Rule The World – Soldier

Act IV: Everything after that.

Songs of particular importance:

Centuries is basically the overall theme for the fic—were this a TV show, it'd be the opening credits music. Pretty much every line fits a character or group of characters (including the Matrix).

The Devil Within is Trepan's theme. The love theme from Star Wars is in there for Terminus and Megatron, as is Kids In The Dark. I've never actually seen either the anime of Tokyo Ghoul or the live action adaptation that the music is from (and which I am instinctively deeply suspicious of) but the music fits the action in the Dead End perfectly.

Spectre Induction and Final Judgement are Megatron getting the Matrix and making his fateful choice, respectively.

Everybody Wants To Rule The World is Starscream's theme.

Gasoline is for Ratchet.

Control and Golden Street are Megatron adapting to the Matrix. Look What You Made Me Do not only fits Starscream and Megatron's interactions, but also cracks me up because of the line "I came back from the dead, I do it all the time," because that is Megatron in a nutshell.

The Inquisition Marches is for the Autobot retreat, and Soldier charmed me immediately because it's perfect for Megatron's headspace after leaving the Decepticons.

Gladiator is like, the most Megatron song ever.

HOLD ME TIGHT OR DON'T is Jazz's theme.

I Don't Care is another character's theme but I'm not saying whose because SPOILERS.

Playlist may expand as I keep working on the fic. And shuffle around as I get things into better order. And maybe even change if something starts driving me up the wall...

Chapter 72

"Megatron, would you and your command staff care to join me?" said Dominus. The majority of the Autobots—referred to by their hosts as the "Autobot Army"—were settling into what had been student housing owned and run by the House of Ambus, and conveniently close to the *actual* physical house of that family. "I'm sure you'll want to stay with your people, but there are some matters to discuss first."

Megatron felt a sort of approval at that. He'd been bracing himself to turn down the offer of separate housing.

"Thank you," he said. He followed Dominus up into the mansion itself, trying to keep his reactions to a minimum. He'd only been somewhere like this once before, when he'd been led up through the Primal Bascilia to give his speech. This was private wealth, not public. His plating prickled with unease.

Dominus said nothing, only showed them to a small, plain room with a decanter of something that glittered pink and gold on the table, and a collection of small, elegant glasses. "It's not high grade," he said. "I doubted you'd enjoy it after your journey. Please, sit."

Megatron did. The seat was sized and built correctly for him. He didn't have to brace himself to ensure he wouldn't break it. Prowl and Jazz had arranged themselves in seats to either side of him, seats built specifically to accommodate doorwinged mechs. They could lean back comfortably without putting pressure on the delicate sensory panels. Minimus settled himself into his own chair, one well sized for him.

Megatron's optics narrowed. Dominus was a considerate host, and Megatron was in no mood to take such generosity for granted.

Ratchet, whom Dominus evidently hadn't anticipated, took the chair intended for Dominus and watched with a raised optic ridge as Dominus collected a replacement from a corner of the room with no fuss. Megatron hid a smile; it was a clever little test Ratchet had devised there, and was revealing of both Dominus's personality, and how eager he was to make this work.

"Megatron Prime," he said, once he was settled, and the very small mech at his side that Minimus had called Rewind shifted uncomfortably in his own, smaller seat, "It's a pleasure. This is my conjunx, Rewind."

Minimus muffled a gasp.

"It's a brave new world, Minimus," said Dominus, with a wry twist to his mouth. "Neither of us risk being spirited away in the night for it, and as for the rest—we should attempt, at least, to lead by example."

It took a few moments for it to dawn on Megatron. Rewind was a data drive. As disposable as Megatron himself, though intended for use by one mech. That could, in bad cases, be much, much worse than what he had endured, and he looked suspiciously at Dominus.

Rewind turned and put a hand on Dominus's own, looking up at his conjunx. "After the Functionists fell, we agreed. No more hiding."

Megatron watched. Listened. For a false note, for anything, and didn't hear it. This time. A small part of him wished he could take this at face value. But there was nothing he could do in the

moment.

His suspicions were allayed somewhat by Rewind taking the lead in the conversation that followed. Rewind seemed confident, knowledgeable, and happy enough to tease Dominus a little as he laid out plans for accommodations, for training areas and weapons and recruitment. He'd been online as a living archive; he'd turned that power to organizing the building of a much larger Autobot army.

Dominus sat next to him, looking besotted.

Megatron's concerns eased, eased more watching the easy touches the two exchanged, nothing like he'd seen between Pharma and Ratchet even when things had been good. He'd watch closely, because he didn't want another mech to come to grief because he'd assumed incorrectly, but it seemed far more likely that this was indeed a genuine affection, and that Dominus wasn't using one of his house's disposables to make himself seem progressive.

"As you can see," said Dominus, with a small smile, "Rewind is the processor behind these arrangements. I am merely a politician."

"Hah," said Rewind and Minimus together, and shared a private look of amusement.

"I am merely a politician," Dominus repeated, more firmly. "And as such, I'm happy to assist you in navigating Iacon's society, Megatron Prime. We'll need substantial goodwill to achieve what we need to survive. Unfortunately, much of the nobility is too damn stupid to realize you're their best chance of getting through this. You'll have to persuade. And doing that will require that you make an appropriate impression."

They all looked at him, easily half again the mass of the next biggest mech in the room (Ratchet) and covered in dirt, with patches stripped down to bare metal where his medic's insignia had been, battered, exhausted, and still angry.

"Rewind may have the easier job," muttered Ratchet. Gave him a small smile. "You might be Prime, kid, but you're not a politician. Or a debutante."

"The latter may be more accurate," said Dominus. He wasn't happy saying it, which made Megatron feel a little better. At least he was viewing this as an unfortunate necessity, rather than a failing on Megatron's part that needed to be corrected.

Megatron folded his arms. "And how am I supposed to do anything if I'm so focused on my appearance?"

Dominus looked nervous. Rewind muffled a laugh.

"You won't um, actually be doing anything," Dominus said at last. "You'll be impressing potential allies. The rest of us—your aides—will consult with you on policy and discuss it with their aides."

"So I'm a figurehead," said Megatron, slowly.

"You'll be setting the policy," said Rewind quickly. "You'll be making those decisions with us. But when we're all in public, yeah, your job is to be a figurehead."

"I will not—" started Megatron.

"It means they'll underestimate you," said Dominus. "They'll look at you and assume you're

just a pretty face being directed by us. They'll spend less time trying to assassinate you as a result. And less time trying to influence you, or control you. We won't stop you from acting as you see appropriate, but when we're introducing you, it's the most effective tactic we can use. It's what's expected of a new Prime, and not adhering to it will cause us trouble. But there's a reason it's tradition—and it's not all because it keeps the Prime weak."

"You're asking for a lot of trust," said Megatron slowly.

"I can vouch for the truth of what he's saying," said Jazz. "It's how this is done. For any new noble, too. You're the public face, but your staff does the actual negotiating. You charm everyone. We maneuver."

Megatron looked at Ratchet.

"Like I pay attention to politics," said Ratchet. "But it sounds like a good idea, Megatron. Dominus here has a reputation for a reason."

Dominus rose. "I won't expect you to make a decision on whether to trust me immediately, Megatron Prime," he said. "But I and the skills of this household are at your disposal, and should you opt to ally with us, this is the approach I recommend."

"Thank you," said Megatron. "I appreciate it, and will consider it." It was difficult to say, because he so disliked the idea of being a figurehead, but Jazz and Ratchet's responses had calmed that disgust a little.

He was also much happier once he saw his quarters. They were certainly better than those at the Decepticon base: an entryway with a pair of chairs and a small table, a door that led to a washracks, and another door that led to a recharge slab and desk.

It was a step above his quarters at the medical academy, but a quick suspicious peek into Jazz and Prowl's rooms across the hall showed they had the same layout. It appeared the same down the hall. No one was showing him any special favoritism, and that made his plating settle.

He was even happier when he noted the contents of the large stack of datapads on the table. They were all logistical information about Iacon: its defenses, the progress of construction, resources, transportation, evacuation routes. Some were political, documentation of the ever shifting alliances and feuds among the nobility. A handful of them were manuals on military strategy.

Megatron was embarrassed to be glad to see those. But he hadn't had much training. He'd been relying on Jazz and Prowl, and he didn't want to remain reliant on them. No one had bothered to teach him those things. Everyone had assumed he knew it. Or that someone else would pick up the slack.

Another sheaf was geography. Simple maps, lists of imports and exports and population densities before the war.

It was a sizable library. He supposed it would keep him occupied while they primped and polished him into something acceptable to Iaconian high society.

He felt hungry and grimy. He went to the washracks, which were undoubtedly the best he'd ever encountered in his function, and he smiled a little, knowing the rest of his Autobots were provided with similar comforts. Some of the solvents were even *scented*. There were large polishing cloths to take excess liquid off your frame, so it wouldn't leave spots. The solvent was

warm.

He turned the solvent as hot as he could stand, and stood under it with a groan of appreciation, flaring his plating so it could reach aching servos. Afterward, he got out and towed himself off with a cloth so obscenely soft his plating caught on it, and got himself a large cube of energon from the dispenser in his quarters. There were rations, but they were enormous, enough to fill even his tank completely. Feeling tired and content, he settled down on one of the chairs and started to read.

He didn't make it long. The exhaustion caught up with him and he fell asleep in the chair, the datapad clasped to his chest. He roused sometime in the night, moved to the recharge slab, and read until he had to put the datapad on the shelf next to the slab before he dozed off again.

He woke again much later to the realization he'd retired sometime early in the afternoon, and it was now full dark. And to a rapid knock on his door.

Megatron opened the door and found Rodimus there, bouncing a little, a cloth over one shoulder. "Hey Megs! They have oil baths!"

"The rooms have washracks," said Megatron, carefully. He wasn't sure what he was missing. Rodimus seemed...unusually excited. "And I already used mine."

"Oil baths are *different*. Grab a polishing cloth and come on, you'll love it!" At Megatron's continued blank expression, Rodimus made an irritated huff. "You can't tell me you've never been in an oil bath before."

"I haven't."

"You've *got* to try it. It'll get dirt out of gears you didn't even know *existed*."

"Thank you, Rodimus, but no," said Megatron. "I'm perfectly clean, and I have work to do."

"You're no fun," said Rodimus cheerfully. "Take my word for it, Megs, you're missing out."

Megatron sighed and shook his head and went back to read. Perhaps he should have actually prepared to recharge, but he was fully rested and continuing to read was more appealing.

A few minutes later, the door chimed again. He got up to answer it and found Ratchet this time, with large polishing cloth in hand.

"Well?" said Ratchet.

"Well what?"

"They have an oil bath. Come on."

"I used the washracks," said Megatron. "And I have work to—"

Ratchet frowned at him and he faltered.

"Come spend time with your officers, idiot," said Ratchet at last. "And get some of the grit

out of your gears. Advice of your physician."

Megatron sighed. "Very well. If I bring a datapad, will it get fried?"

"If I can reach it and it's not a trashy romance novel, yeah," said Ratchet. "Come on."

They walked down to the basement level of the building together. Ratchet snorted and shook his head. "Primus, this takes me back to the medical academy. Pretty fancy, but the feeling's the same. Maybe someone'll have to throw a completely humiliatingly overexuberant party, that will *really* bring back memories."

"You at a party?" said Megatron, dryly. "That takes imagining."

"I can still drink you under the table, you arrogant young gasket, and don't think for a minute I can't." Ratchet gave him a grin. "I had quite a reputation in the academy."

Megatron tried to reconcile that with the Ratchet he knew. Then he sighed and shook his helm. "I'm not sure I believe it," he said. There had been a note of wistfulness in Ratchet's voice as he described the parties, and it led Megatron to add, "Perhaps you need an opportunity to demonstrate."

It made Ratchet smile. "You're on."

They ran into Impactor and First Aid just outside the bathhouse, First Aid looking excited and Impactor wary.

"Oh good, you got him!" First Aid chirped, bouncing a little.

"Yeah, he seems to think it's going to bite him or something," said Ratchet, and rolled his optics. "If I'd know you'd kick up such a fuss I would have made sure to take you to one of these during your apprenticeship."

No, you wouldn't have, thought Megatron. *Think of Pharma's reaction.*

Aloud, he managed a wry chuckle. "I simply don't understand how it differs from a high-quality washracks."

"Yeah," said Impactor, obviously relieved to voice his concerns. "I figure, if the solvent doesn't make you dirtier and it's warm, you're doing pretty well. What's the point of sitting around in oil, anyway? Seems like a waste of time. And oil."

"You'll see," said First Aid. He grabbed Impactor's arm and tugged him into the room. Ratchet leveled a glare at Megatron that did more work than any tugging ever could.

Megatron followed.

He felt his plating fan out as it hit the cool dry air of the bathhouse, the cramping servos in his back loosening. There was a lot of noise, people talking all at once in little groups, active splashing—Bumblebee and Smokescreen had started some sort of splashing contest, and the biggest pool had something heaving around under the oil which, after a few moments, Megatron was glad to see was Minimus making his way back to the bench around the edge after having slipped off. Sunstreaker and Sideswipe were whacking each other with their polishing cloths.

"Is this supposed to be relaxing? It looks like warfare," said Impactor. He sounded relieved.

"Biggest pool," ordered Ratchet.

Megatron eyed it. He hung the polishing cloth on the provided rack for something to do. The far side of the pool had a massively disorganized series of shelves with brushes and other materials he didn't entirely recognize. The pool itself was intimidatingly large, with a bench built into the edge that was just deep enough that Minimus, standing, had his head and shoulders above the surface. As Megatron watched, Jazz pulled a lightweight box into the pool and put it on the bench. Minimus sat on it, far more comfortable. The oil itself was thick and deep amber, dark enough to obscure anyone fully immersed. It smelled clean, but industrial—very unlike the smell of medical-grade oil.

"The stairs are here," said Ratchet descending into the pool with considerable alacrity. "Come on." He slung himself onto the bench and used it to get across to the shelves of tools.

The other baths seemed shallower and smaller, a better size for most of the Autobots—indeed, for anyone but him and Impactor. This one, though, was mostly filled with his command staff, all too small for it. Prowl was obviously using one of the blocks like Minimus to keep himself at a comfortable height out of the oil. Jazz wasn't, and was quite literally up to his visor in it.

Megatron looked down at the oil. Then at Impactor.

"Oh no," said Impactor. "You go first. You're the curious one."

"Thank you for that," said Megatron, and carefully put a foot in. He was pretty sure Jazz was laughing at him. Something about Prowl's expression made him suspect him as well.

"So?" said Impactor, right behind him.

Megatron contemplated his foot. The oil was warm, pleasantly so, but the idea of completely immersing himself was very, very strange.

Being laughed at was worse. He stepped all the way in, and started down the steps.

The middle of the pool sloped gradually down toward the center. When he stood there, the oil came up to the middle of his chest.

Jazz stood up. "Fan your plating out, mech. And close your vents, obviously. If you're getting too warm hop out and run your fans a bit to cool down. But you want the oil in all the joints and seams. Get all the grit out and your joints greased."

"It seems like overkill," said Impactor, hesitating on the second step. Megatron began to nod and then something grabbed him by the ankles and yanked him under completely.

He made an undignified startled blat of static as he was pulled under. The grip on his ankles released as soon as he went down. He flailed in the murk and grabbed something that felt like an arm. Getting his feet under him took a moment longer than he thought it should, the viscous oil slowing his movements, but he gained the bottom of the pool and shoved himself to the surface, prize in hand.

The arm was red and gold and attached to a grinning Rodimus. "Gotchya," said the tiny speedframe.

"Rodimus!" snapped Ratchet. "We had enough trouble getting him in here in the first place!"

Rodimus winked at Megatron. "Worth it," he said.

Megatron growled and dunked him back into the oil, but he could feel a smile tugging at his mouth. He gave Rodimus's helm an extra shove for good measure, then waded over to Jazz and Prowl to settle on the low bench. "I don't think it's a coincidence that Ratchet drags me down here to find the rest of my command staff in the same bath," he says. "This late at night, too. And with the rest of our faction making such a diverting racket."

"Told you he'd figure it out," said Jazz, smug.

"It's also because you can use a good cleaning," said Ratchet brusquely. "Soak for a bit and then we'll start scrubbing."

Megatron frowned. "Must it be so public?"

"It's usually communal," said Prowl. He flicked his doorwings. "I cannot physically reach most of the assembly for these; any mech with sensory articulations on their back needs assistance."

"Or this," said Rodimus, climbing up with his spoiler flicking.

"Mutual grooming is quite common in certain circles as a result," said Prowl. "If it's particularly uncomfortable for you, however..."

Megatron looked around him, then deliberately flared his plating to let more oil in. "It simply takes adjustment," he said. He settled into the oil. "So tell me. What are we meeting about?"

"Do you really need to ask that?" said Jazz. "You weren't real happy about what Dominus told us. We gotta talk about it, mech. All of it."

"Because this has gotten more dangerous than ever," said Prowl. "I got some more reports from my contacts. It shouldn't really be a surprise, but the conservative factions in the city are very unhappy about you. Starting with your very existence and working from there. We're not going to make much headway with most of them. The best we can hope is that they can be distracted while we erode the moderates."

"Which leads us to the unfortunate part," said Jazz, "Where Dominus is completely right. You gotta blend in. Play the stupid politician whose staff thinks for him. And you gotta play the part well. That means we have to polish you up and paint you and shine you to an inch of your function. And you've got a lot of etiquette to learn."

"Deportment," said Mirage, shimmering into visibility next to Megatron. "You have to walk right, behave right, seem like you're playing their game."

Megatron's mouth twisted downward. "This is what Dominus told me, yes. Do you really agree with him this much?"

"Let me put it this way," said Mirage. "My creators—the heads of the house that commissioned me—had me shadowplayed for the first time when I'd been online for six months. It wasn't the last."

Megatron stared at him in outright horror.

"It was a specific thing," said Mirage. "For sneaking energon treats. The lead dusted ones. I

still can't eat them."

"What Mirage is saying is that they'll do anything to control you," said Jazz. "You got the Matrix. They're pretty torqued off about that, but killing a Prime looks real bad, so they're going to try and work with it. Ratch here says you can't be shadowplayed. That's good."

"But we can," said Prowl gravely. "And they can try to install others in our place to better control you. They've been playing the political game for millenia. Since the Guiding Hand were something other than mythology. You're their target, Megatron. You have to make yourself an unappealing one."

"You have to seem safe," Jazz said. "Maybe a little stupid. Generally cooperative."

"Our best bet is to charm them," said Prowl. "If the Decepticons do what we think they will—begin expanding their territory—the nobility will come to us. To you. Because you're the safer option and they can't do it without you or your army, as small as we are."

"Meanwhile," said Roddy, surfacing again, "Me and Bumblebee and a couple other mecha who'll fit in here are gonna go around hand have a chat with the shopkeepers. Ironhide and co will chat with the construction workers."

"Why can't I do that?" Megatron said. "There, I'm sure I won't put a pede wrong." *There, I won't have to play the spoiled noble.*

"Not a chance, my mech," said Jazz. "Not a chance. That'll look like you're raising an army against them. Don't do that."

"I know it's difficult," said Prowl.

"Goes against every scrap of his code, you mean," said Ratchet, and met Megatron's gaze. "Look, kid. You can't be controlled. I think everyone here knows it. It's what we love about you."

Megatron shifted uneasily.

"But here, that's a problem. Letting people know that? That's an even bigger problem. We don't want you to die, Megatron. We've got to keep you safe and alive, and if they figure out you can't be controlled? They're going to kill you. Put the Matrix in some sweet little pushover like Minimus here."

Minimus glared at him.

"Sorry," said Ratchet, then shrugged. "But that's the problem, Megatron. We're going to have to best them at their own game. I don't think any of us will enjoy it, but that's the way through this."

The only way out is through. Terminus sometimes said that. Megatron sighed heavily.

"We can't let the Autobot dream die because of your pride," said Jazz.

Megatron sighed again. He slipped off the bench and immersed himself to the neck cables in the oil. "I suppose that's the other reason you brought me down here," he said. "So I'd be presentable."

"Yeah that too," said Ratchet, and tossed him a brush. "Start on your shins and pedes. Let's start talking strategy."

"Tactics," Prowl corrected. "If it's for his presentation tomorrow night and it's minutiae, it's tactics. Overview and broad plans are strategy."

"Shut up," said Ratchet. "Give me your back, Megatron."

"You'll be presented to the court tomorrow evening," said Mirage. "We'll have all day to prepare you, which isn't ideal."

"All day to prepare for a single appearance? A single party?" Megatron didn't hide the dubious tone from his voice.

"For reference, I spent two years preparing for mine," said Mirage. "And my family is of high standing, but we're not the sort they draw on for Primal Candidates." His mouth twisted bitterly. "Mostly, our job is to conjunx Primal Candidates. Even a failed candidate carries significant social clout."

Megatron paused in his scrubbing and stared again.

"Even the fork you use will be watched. It'll have significance. People may decide their alliances based on that."

Megatron stared some more. "What the frag is a fork?"

Mirage looked to Jazz. Ratchet snickered a little behind him. Prowl had produced a datapad from subspace and was staring at it with his doorwings flat and stressed. In that silence, Impactor raised a slow hand.

"I don't know what a fork is, either," he said.

"Oh lay off," said Ratchet. "He's not had any delicacies that you eat with one. Miner, remember? Medics don't even use them—the sort of slag you eat with them is *expensive*. Frag, Megatron, we've got to engage your Fuel Intake Moderation chip or you'll be overcharged under the table by the second course. I'll tweak the efficiency of your processing downward too."

It was Megatron's turn to be horrified. "Why?"

"Because the nobility eat very refined, very rich food," said Ratchet, "and you're built to survive on slag and raw crystals if it comes to that, and your frame will simply get you *very* drunk otherwise, and we can't have you seen like that at your presentation."

"So wasteful," said Megatron, because it was all he could think.

"Are the rest of us going to get a good crack at that fuel too?" said Impactor.

"Only after the party," said Jazz. "Unless you somehow got Spec-Ops digital chematophores."

"Yeah the longer this conversation goes on, the less I understand of it," said Impactor.

"I can sense poisons with my fingers," Jazz said, wiggling his fingers at Ironhide. "I get to analyze everything he'll consume before he tries it just in case one of our friends tries to off him without converting him first. You and Ironhide get to be his bodyguards and you guys can't be seen to be eating with all the fancy mecha at the table, because it will put the poor little dears off their fuel."

"Frag this," said Impactor. "Let's just get a spark extractor and torch the city."

"No, Impactor," said Prowl, sounding very tired.

"You get to fuel on fancy things all evening and I have to watch," said Impactor to Megatron. "Fragger. I would never have pulled you out of that crevasse if I knew this was how you were going to thank me."

"I'm about as happy about this as you are."

"You're an idiot. You're going to be the one fueling. Fragger." Impactor waded over to Megatron and turned his back on him. "You get my back and we'll call it even."

"Fair enough," said Megatron. "So. Ironhide and Impactor are my bodyguards. You will make sure no one poisons me—I doubt anyone will bother, what a waste of good fuel—and Prowl...?"

"I will not attend. In case someone actually does poison you," said Prowl.

"It's like a battle," said Jazz, coming over with another brush and attacking the seams at Megatron's waist with little regard for personal space. "Can't stick the whole command team in one place."

"And Mirage—"

"I will accompany and advise you," said Mirage. "As well as preparing you for the event, and consulting with Sunstreaker on how to manage your paint."

"Primus," said Megatron again, disgusted. He let them scrub him. And took a small amount of pleasure in being able to clean Impactor just as thoroughly. It felt like revenge.

Chapter 73

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Megatron had just gotten back from a pleasant communal breakfast, his frame feeling better than it had in ages, when there was a sharp rap at his door. He opened it.

"Well," said Sunstreaker, eying Megatron critically. "I can see why I'm needed. And not just because Jazz thought you'd be more willing to put up with a detailer who you know you can beat in a fight—which was just because I let you win, by the way."

Behind him, Mirage groaned and put a hand over his face.

"At least you're in decent shape to start with," said Sunstreaker, elbowing his way into the room. "Mirage, help me pick up the matting here, and bring me that stool."

"You're not that inaccurate, are you?" said Megatron.

"No, but I'm pretty sure you're going to squirm like a protoform."

Megatron watched glumly as they arranged Sunstreaker's tools on the table, and Mirage stepped back and brought an immense stack of datapads out of his subspace.

"As threatened," he said mildly, "I'll catch you up on the expected etiquette while Sunstreaker does your first round of painting. We'll have to let it dry and then start the sealing process."

"Have to let it dry, then overlayer it, then seal it," said Sunstreaker. "Wash you off again and start on the decorations."

"Decorations," said Megatron, confused. He thought of festive lanterns on city streets. They had better not try to make him glow.

"Jewelry," said Mirage, and produced yet *another* case from subspace. He opened it and Megatron blinked hard, staring at the contents.

They were jewels he'd only ever seen in their rough forms. He'd been specialized in energon mining, but energon seams had an affinity for precious and semiprecious gems. Hence the old rumors that certain crystals could be processed into energon.

It wasn't that he was unfamiliar with the deep, pinkish red gems that sparkled back at him from the case. It was that he'd never seen cut ones so big outside of holograms. He'd never seen them cut so well, either; he was familiar with them as ugly pink stones poking from calcites and micas, largely valuable because of the bonus the miner who found them received.

There was a piece clearly meant to go around his collar fairing, fist-size gem in the center, smaller ones to either side, all three blazing a color somewhere between fresh energon and his own optics. The immediate setting was silver, but the metal joining them was matte black. There were two elaborate bracers sized for his arms, the same black metal set with small glittering red gems. Finger sheathes, joined to a central gem by a fine glittering web of silver chain. And a larger net of gems connected by both black and silver chain, evidently meant to cover a helm.

Megatron stared.

"A donation from the House of Ambus," said Mirage. "Dominus said they had it made to your specifications as soon as they learned who had the Matrix. Bribed the detailer. It would have been a useful gift to court a new Prime, no matter how tightly fettered, to their side."

"I'll break them all within a megacycle," said Megatron, a little blankly. "I've never worn anything like this. I won't know how to protect it."

"Dominus thought of that too," said Mirage. "The metal is one of the strongest known to science. Mostly it's used to reinforce warframes. They've put forcefield generators in to protect the gems, since they *are* quite valuable. All of it will magnetize to your frame, so it won't just be the clasps holding it in place. They assured me you can go into battle wearing it, if you wanted. Though, please don't do that."

"Can you stop wowing him with the sparklies," said Sunstreaker. "Gimme your arm."

Megatron sighed and offered the arm. "So what do they mean? I'm sure you've attached vast depths of meaning to the things."

"Oh yes," said Mirage. "Messatinian rubies, aside from being beautiful, large, unusually strong, and unusually rare, signify that the bearer is his own mech, passionately driven, and impossible to intimidate. Given Messatine's role in all this, we thought it appropriate. Silver is for pureness of spark. And the black is largely because it will look good on you. Its significance is purely in the shapes it's been wrought into: the collar is a hymn to Epistemus in an ancient cursive that's nearly impossible to decipher now. They've used the same script for the gauntlets; they're a specific reference to Primus in his protective role. The finger guards are the lines from the medical oath, though they were modified for you at Ratchet's advising—they now read *to prevent harm and grant protection to my patients or the helpless*, rather than the traditional *do no harm*. He said the other version came in direct conflict with your duties as Prime, and we'd better not burden you with that conflict and guilt."

That...that was all the proof Megatron needed that Ratchet did forgive him for the death of that Decepticon. Of Overlord. He consciously pushed aside the emotion that crowded his intake and blinked hard.

"It's a fine gift," he said at last.

"Yeah and now I have the unenviable task of making you look good enough to wear it," said Sunstreaker. "Hold still while I paint your hands. Cut me with your talons and I'll take a nail file to you."

"You are remarkably unhappy that I won that fight, aren't you," said Megatron.

"I let you win," said Sunstreaker to his hand. Mirage folded away the box.

"We need to talk etiquette," he said.

"Oh Primus," said Megatron, resigned.

"The most important things first," said Mirage. "The life or death ones. Don't take energon from anyone. If they put it down on a table or other surface first, it's fine, but not directly from them."

Megatron rolled his optics. "And why not? Is it bad luck or something like that?"

"No, it means you're agreeing to conjoin them."

"It means I'll *what now?!'*"

"And it could be poisoned," said Sunstreaker. "Very popular, poisoning."

"And it could be poisoned," said Mirage, sounding somewhat embarrassed to be agreeing with Sunstreaker.

"At the same time?"

"Speeds up the inheritance, I'd expect," said Sunstreaker with a little shrug.

"Probably not at the same time," said Mirage, with a glare at Sunstreaker. "On the same note, while I don't think anyone will be so hasty as to try and assassinate you openly tonight, keep your distance from the other guests. You want to look distant and unapproachable. You're supposed to be the next thing to Primus in the room. And you want enough room that you can see if someone goes for a knife." Mirage sighed heavily. "We also don't want anyone spreading rumors that you're too friendly."

"What?" said Megatron, confused.

"He means we can't have them thinking you're a slut," said Sunstreaker cheerfully, now working on his upper arm.

"From standing too close," said Megatron.

Mirage looked very unhappy. "Yes."

Megatron stared at him some more. "You grew up here, among these people."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry." He meant it, too. It sounded completely miserable.

Mirage gave him something sort of like a smile. "It's appreciated. It's also more than likely my creators are going to be there. Please don't tell them what you think of them."

"I won't. What do you mean by creators?"

"They commissioned me for the household," said Mirage. "I was...something of a disappointment. They may ignore me. They may be very rude."

Megatron's optics went to the mech's arm. "Did they do that?"

Mirage looked down.

"I'll respect your wishes as long as they don't attempt to physically harm you," said Megatron.

"That's as good as you're going to get," said Sunstreaker. "For that matter, I'll pull one of these preening fraggers' arms off if they try something like that on you. I'm not Prime. I don't have to behave myself."

"Please no dismembering," said Mirage, clearly sure it was a lost cause.

Ratchet came by in the late afternoon to find Megatron mostly presentable, Sunstreaker working on his face and Mirage hovering over his shoulder.

"Hold still, you fragger," said Sunstreaker. "I'm going to put the airbrush up your nose if you don't quit wiggling, that'll teach you."

Megatron growled.

"I'm absolutely up for round two if that's what it'll take to make you behave," said Sunstreaker. "You may have won our first fight, but it was probably beginner's luck."

"Oh Primus," said Mirage, his light voice distraught, "don't put a line *there!*"

"Why the frag not," said Sunstreaker. "It looks good."

"It means he's a prostitute is what it looks like!"

"What, seriously?"

"An extremely expensive escort, at least, but *yes*."

"Don't I get a say in this?" said Megatron without moving his mouth. "Because after what you've been telling me this evening is about, I think that's only *appropriate*."

"Your sense of humor is atrocious," Mirage informed him. "It's also infectious. You've ruined mine for polite company *forever*."

"Fragging good. One of you should just put a pipe up my aft, acting the way I'm expected to this evening will be *a lot easier that way*."

"You gotta buy me dinner first, sweetspark," said Sunstreaker. "But I can if you're into that."

"And I can make sure it's medical grade," said Ratchet. "Megatron, I'm here to adjust your fuel usage."

Megatron stiffly held out an arm, a port uncovered. Ratchet ambled over, pausing to look into a case filled with jewelry. "Primus. That's impressive. Wait."

He reached in to lift the piece that had caught his eye. "How did they find out you had a sensory crest?"

"I wasn't aware they had," said Megatron out of the side of his mouth.

"This is specifically for a crest," said Ratchet, staring at the net of gems caught in black and silver chain. "We can make it work with your helmet, but... hm, is there a—there we go. Yeah there's a false helmet-top to protect your brain, too."

Megatron stared at him out of the corner of an optic.

"Is he nearly done?" Ratchet asked Sunstreaker.

"Just needs the sealant," said Sunstreaker.

"Can we have a moment?"

"Yeah, just don't scuff anything."

Ratchet watched them go, then closed the door behind them and sat down in front of him. "You doing all right, kid? I know you don't like anything around," he gestured over his face and neck.

"My face has been all right so far," said Megatron, and glanced sidelong at the box. "Will it be rude if I wear it over my helmet?"

"Probably not," said Ratchet. "I'm fairly sure it'll look better on your crest. They're pretty rare, and it would be an attention-grabber. I bet all this seems stupid to you, but in Iacon, how you present yourself is a weapon in and of itself."

"Yes, Mirage said as much," said Megatron, resigned. "Can you step back?"

Ratchet did. Megatron slowly, hesitantly, reached up to his head and spent a few moments concentrating, probably releasing the clasps that held his heavy helmet in place. Then he lifted it free.

Ratchet held very still. Megatron stared at the floor, face still, while his sensory crest rose, flinched back, rose again, each petal working independently.

Megatron let out a long, shuddering vent. "Can you get the helm cover? Can I place it myself?"

"Yes and yes," said Ratchet. He was careful to give him a wide berth, even more careful not to end up behind him. He handed the helm over; it would cover the top, back, and sides of his helm, giving it much a similar shape as his usual helmet. The difference was, it left his sensory crest free to flex and display.

Megatron carefully fastened it in place, visibly relaxing. "My forehead is more exposed than I'd like," he said at last. "But it's bearable."

"Any chance we could paint your crest?" asked Ratchet.

"No."

"We'll stick with sealing it, then. Give it a wipe with that," he tossed a clean rag Megatron's way, "and I'll get Sunstreaker back in."

"Yes," said Megatron, and started carefully cleaning the delicate flanges.

"You'll want to know if it's tolerable with other people in the room," Ratchet added.

Megatron nodded, jerky, coming to grips with it, and Ratchet put his head back out. "You two can come in now," he said. "We just need the sealant."

"Wow, that's impressive," said Sunstreaker of his crest, and Mirage just stared a few moments and then smiled. "That will certainly ensure they pay attention."

Megatron seemed all right with the process, even managing a small grim smile for Ratchet's benefit as Sunstreaker sealed the paint on his face into place with a gloss: dark lines around his

optics, a darkening of his cheeks and the edges of his nasal ridge. The end result exaggerated the planes and severity of his face and made that nasal ridge look more broken-and-roughly-reset than ever. By the time they were done, Megatron's age was impossible to guess. He looked fierce, intimidating, and totally unreadable. A military commander and stern, wise leader.

Who went into the washracks grumbling like a protoform. Ratchet turned to Mirage. "You make sure no one sneaks up on him from behind, and no one touches his head or neck. Understood?"

"Understood," said Mirage. "After what Soundwave did..."

"Lousy brainfragger," said Sunstreaker, restraining his language with an evident effort. "You two dress him, I need to pretty myself up."

Megatron came out again fairly soon, and they got the jewels on him. He seemed pleased with the arm guards. Much less so with the finger-sheathes, and it took serious fussing to get the central jewels to magnetize in the right place, the center backs of his hands, and to get the small slender bracelets they were attached to around his wrists. Then the massive jeweled collar with its sullen rubies, and then the helm net, which Ratchet had to help with after Megatron booted Mirage from the room.

"Look at yourself in the mirror," Ratchet suggested. Megatron went into the washracks and went very, very still.

"I see," he said softly, still staring at himself, and Ratchet stepped away. He'd wait for when Megatron was ready.

Megatron had a little time to himself to come to terms with the mech in the mirror. He wasn't even all that accustomed to seeing his crest, much less it fully flared and adorned. His new paint and décor were both strange and perfect. They seemed like him, even if it startled him to see himself this way.

He looked like an idealized version of himself. The way he might appear if he were a character in a novel. An epic poem, like the ones about the Guiding Hand.

He had more or less come to terms with it, stopped staring at himself, when the next wave of the invasion came in the form of Jazz, Prowl, and Rodimus. Rodimus wasn't supposed to be there, but he was hiding something behind his back and refused to be dismissed.

"Remember how I said we needed a logo?" he chirped, and then held out the object. "Take it, Megs, take it!"

Megatron sighed and gave him a small smile and took the object, finding a small metal badge the size of his palm; a square, red face.

"He's been joking that he modeled it on me," said Prowl. "It had better be a joke, at least."

Megatron turned it this way and that, and then noticed the others all wore a similar one, though theirs were, by necessity, somewhat smaller.

"It just sticks," said Rodimus, and Megatron very carefully adhered it to his chest, right between the arabesques Sunstreaker had spent hours painting onto his chest.

Jazz and Prowl had repainted themselves as well, still black and white, but each's paintjob was the mirror of the other. They'd also added discreet glyphs in silver along their doorwings, an indication that they were both conjunxed—and conjunxed to one another. Ratchet had settled for a polish and wax. Rodimus had refreshed his own colors, and it hurt to look at him.

"A cloak, and a staff," said Prowl, and handed them over one at a time. The cloak was long black metalmesh, surprisingly light. It attached to the collar, so its lines didn't interrupt that of the collar. And then the staff.

"At least this way you're armed," said Rodimus, cheerfully. Mirage, waiting in the doorway with a datapad, grimaced.

"True," said Megatron, glad of its heft in his hand, even though it was too slender to do any kind of damage. There was a golden starburst at the top, something that would be a serious hinderance should he ever actually use it for defense, but it felt good to be holding *something*.

"Please don't hit anyone with the ceremonial staff," said Mirage, in the tones of a mech who knew his battle was already lost.

"A few things more to review," said Prowl, pulling out a datapad, and Megatron groaned a little, settling in for the last few hours before his presentation.

Chapter End Notes

Can I do a chapter that's entirely the main characters preparing for a ball? Why yes, I can...

I will be at TFCon Toronto this weekend, hanging around the lobby on Saturday evening with a hopeful expression and a nametag. Come say hi!

Chapter 74

Megatron wished that he had Prowl at his back as well, but held his helm up and stepped into the entranceway.

"Name, please?" said the beautifully painted mech at the door. His golden optics were very wide behind the patterning—the question was ceremonial, and the mech obviously knew who Megatron was.

"Megatron," he said, and Jazz, behind him, put in, "Prime. And entourage."

The small mech bowed, hastily, as if he was more than a little afraid of them, and stepped through the door, tapping the staff in his hand twice. The room fell silent.

"Megatron Prime and entourage," he announced, and the room stayed silent. Jazz gave Megatron a firm nudge through the door. Megatron managed, somehow, not to stumble.

Fortunately, Mirage had drilled him on what to do. *You're the Prime. No one in this room outranks you; don't bow. But you do need to show them respect.*

As Mirage had instructed, he inclined his head to them, looking through the garishly painted crowd of mecha, making eye contact here and there. Then he carefully descended the stairs, head held high.

Once you're ten steps from the entryway, Dominus will join us. He'll introduce you to our important allies and enemies—anyone whom you cannot afford to offend.

Nervousness gripped his tanks, which was ridiculous, because he hadn't felt quite this intimidated even when he'd been facing all of Cybertron as a prisoner. Then, he'd been angry. Right now, there was no comforting wall of rage. Nothing to shield him from the curiosity or the judgement around him.

"Megatron Prime," said Dominus, approaching him. He hadn't been made into such an object as Megatron had; he'd refreshed his paint and added a brilliant gloss. From what Mirage had told him, it was an affectation of a style greatly in vogue among the higher echelons of academic Iacon. "Allow me to introduce..."

Name after name, some friendly, some reserved, like the justice by name of Tyrest, someone Mirage had identified as sympathetic to the Autobot cause, but not particularly pleased about Megatron's background. Some outright hostile. Megatron felt Mirage tense behind him as they were introduced to a mech named Phantasm, painted in blues and silvers several shades darker than Mirage, but with a very similar construction. Phantasm bowed, correctly and not a millimeter more, and fixed Megatron with a cold look. "Honored, I'm sure," he said, in a tone a few shades off an actual insult.

Megatron, equally coolly, inclined his head.

Phantasm looked past him at Mirage, and the cold look morphed into outright hostility. Megatron stepped between them on instinct, taking the brunt of the glare himself. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance," he said.

Phantasm was not happy to be distracted. "Of course. Tell me, Megatron Prime, how many warriors have you brought to help us in the city's defense?"

Megatron smiled, showing his fangs. "That depends on the assistance we get from the city itself. My people will be worse than useless if we do not have the resources with which to fight."

"Yet we have no motivation to assist you," said Phantasm. "The Decepticons will leave us alone—they have so far—but you, by every account, have antagonized them extremely. Why should we offer you refuge?"

Mirage had prepared him for milder, politer versions of this question. He'd also been prepared for Mirage's superiors to be rude to him. He was, however, glad of the rudeness. It meant he hadn't struck first. "You're sitting in the most stable city on the planet," he told Phantasm. "A spectacular example of the world after Functionism. It's a rich gem, one that any ruler would be proud to hold—and Starscream and Optimus are no exception. They've already turned against their civilian allies, when there was nothing to gain. Now, when you're an appealing target, and their military is stronger than ever, you think they'll be able to resist temptation? We can certainly go elsewhere. Should we find ourselves unwelcome, we certainly *will* go elsewhere."

Phantasm was looking surprised. From what Megatron understood of the mech, he was probably startled to hear such an articulate response. He pressed his advantage. "Indeed, the very fact that we were not attacked during our journey tells me that Decepticon High Command's attention is elsewhere. Where, then, has it gone?"

He asked in a pleasant, conversational tone, but Phantasm's plating flared anyway in a defensive manner. "Far be it from *me* to concern myself with what a gang of thugs and criminals are preoccupying themselves with."

"Ah," said Megatron. "Forgive me; your first question led me to believe you were at least nominally interested in the defense of this city." He inclined his helm again. "I suppose I will have to concentrate my attention on some individual who is involved in its governance and protection instead, and refrain from boring you."

From behind him, there was an audible noise as Jazz's hand met Jazz's forehead, and a sudden increase in stiffness from Mirage. But it was worth it for the expression on Phantasm's face. He gave the mech a more pleasant smile and looked past him to greet the next mech in the line, a clear dismissal. He felt better about the whole situation already.

"I, for one, am impressed," said Dominus. "You make enemies like a mech happy in his work. Phantasm was hostile to begin with, but he's a great deal more so now—he's over there conspiring with his consort, Illusion, right now."

Megatron looked over. Phantasm was indeed conspiring, and conspiring was the only word for it, helms leaned together and glancing at the rest of the room and Megatron, with a mech a little smaller and slimmer than him, absolutely dripping in glittering clear jewels. By contrast, Megatron was happy to feel his own finery was understated. "How much trouble can he make, now he's motivated?"

"A fair degree," said Dominus. "He's not exactly the head of the conservative faction, but he is certainly deeply embedded."

"He certainly seemed inclined to make trouble to start with," said Megatron.

"Yeah, but you were supposed to be pretending to be *stupid*," said Jazz. "Instead you've been stupid, but in the wrong way. Phantasm knows you're smart and knows you hate him now, *neither of which we wanted him to know*."

"His comment couldn't go unanswered." He felt like a sullen newspark saying it, but it *was* true. "They're scared of the Decepticons, and they're scared we're bringing the Decepticons with us; we can't let people like Phantasm go around insisting that we're here to parasitize them and put them in danger."

"Yeah, but that's what we have me 'n Mirage for. You look disdainful and haughty, and we tell Phantasm and his buddies to frag off, and also that they're wrong. Stop trying to be your usual brilliant self."

"Maybe you two are going about this the wrong way," said Dominus softly. "It doesn't have to be Megatron that came from."

They turned to look at him.

"You're his staffers," he said. "Of course they assume you've prepared him to be questioned. Take the credit, Jazz, Mirage. Any eagerness to blurt it out? That's him; he's very unpracticed and none too good at recognizing the politically appropriate time or phrasing, because of his background. That way, we can keep him seeming stupid. And account for the fact that it's very, very unlikely that'll be the last time he tells one of these idiots off."

"I should have thought of that," said Mirage, sounding chagrined. "I'm sorry. He—distracted me. It won't happen again."

"He looked like he wanted to kill you," said Megatron. "I take it that was your creator."

Mirage nodded unhappily.

"You're more than forgiven for your distraction," said Megatron. "Come on. Let's see how many more of his friends I can offend before the main course."

"That shouldn't be an *objective*," said Mirage, but there was a stifled laugh in it.

"I already offend them by existing," Megatron replied, and then strode off into the crowd with far more confidence than he felt.

The subjects of conversation weren't as onerous as Megatron had feared, but the interactions were a great deal more awkward. What Mirage hadn't thought to warn him about was that the medical field was a popular one for the nobility to send their unneeded offspring into. When it came to conjunxing, it was a sort of advantage, an extra qualification for a high-ranking mate. The mecha not qualified for that kind of alliance often became administrators.

Megatron felt as if quite a lot of his experiences at the Academy had suddenly been explained. That satisfaction, however, was certainly not worth running into a group of his former classmates, still just as haughty as they had been.

One of them was the flyer that had tried to get First Aid to abandon him early on, and the others he recognized but hadn't interacted with directly. He felt himself start to tense as he saw them, the sorts of smiles they were wearing and the angle of their wings and wheels. They looked like mecha sharing a joke.

The flyer bowed to him, a little lower than he needed to. "Megatron Prime! Come and join

us—we were just reminiscing about our time in school."

Megatron didn't need Jazz's nudge to know that it would be unpardonably rude to refuse, or that it would raise questions he didn't want to answer. He wished Ratchet had stuck with them instead of wandering off in search of high grade; he would have felt a lot bolder with The Hatchet at his back.

He joined them anyway.

"We were just remarking on how seldom we saw you at parties," said one of them. Megatron had never bothered to learn his name and was fairly determined not to now. "Especially with a mentor like Ratchet. You know, there's still a set of pedeprints on the ceiling of Jihaxus Hall attributed to him? They're still debating how he did it."

"He never told me about it," said Megatron as neutrally as he could.

"Too bad. Missed opportunities and all that. We would have loved to have your company."

Megatron stared flatly at him, silently calling him a liar. Jazz prodded him in the abdomen, subtly rather than hard.

"Shouldn't you be wearing medics' insignias?" said the flyer. "You went through all the training like the rest of us." One of his friends whispered urgently in his audial. "Oh. Did you not take the exams?"

"He was busy being Prime, you aft," said that friend. "A Prime and then shot."

"Primus, what a way to get out of the exams. Wish I'd tried that," said a third, and the group snickered. "Well, *I* passed, so I suppose I didn't need to."

And there it was, the scalpel in the polishing cloth. Megatron felt himself flush hot with embarrassment, just as he had in medical school on the rare occasions they'd seen fit to notice him enough to taunt him. It didn't matter that he was Prime, it didn't matter that he'd arrived in Iacon at the head of an army, or that he'd probably saved more mecha than they had in their entire functions, he was still the scared, awkward, friendless miner surrounded by mecha who thought he was, at best, a joke.

"The medics' oath includes a promise not to cause harm," he said. "To anyone, including your enemies."

They looked at each other, grinning as if he'd said something funny.

"And as Prime," he continued, "I'm responsible for the safety of my people. And if there's one thing that my time treating mecha on the battlefield taught me, it's that sometimes, you have to choose between the lives of your patients, and those of the enemies trying to kill them. I can make that choice. And because of that, I have no business swearing that oath."

The looks they were giving each other stopped being amused. They were worried, a little unnerved.

And then Ratchet came up from their other side, a worryingly vivid pink drink with a curly straw in hand and a truly unpleasant grin on his face. "The pede-prints were *easy*," he said, "and if any of you kept your senses when overcharged, you would have figured it out by now. Also, Primus, didn't two of you get kicked out for hiring people to take the exams for you? And you," he turned to the one who'd boasted about passing, "you *do* know that your final scores are public

knowledge and your passing grade was marginal at best? No? Sorry to surprise you. But I suppose you weren't seeking a medical career after all, so it's all right. Anyway, I think it goes without saying that if I were leaking out, I'd prefer to have Megatron here wrist-deep in in my chassis over any of you. Cheers."

Megatron took the opportunity to bow out as well, relishing the stunned expression on their faces. He wanted to leave it there before any of the fraggers could think up a retort.

"You know," said Jazz softly, "sometimes I wish Ratchet liked you a little *less*."

"No, no," said Mirage, "that was actually pretty acceptable. At least Megatron made a pretty good start on defending himself, too. They were trying to discredit him but the insults they chose were the sorts of things they'd insult a fellow noble with. Think of it as a weird sort of acceptance."

"I don't really want to," muttered Megatron.

"We can use that," said Jazz at the same time. "It's time for me to go work the room. I leave him in your hands. Remember, kids, don't get anyone killed."

He thumped Impactor on the shoulder on his way. "You two are doing amazing, by the way," he whispered.

"Can we go do a little less amazing and punch the aft-ports?"

"No. Remember, pretend to be furniture."

The response was a rebellious grumble and glare from both of them. It made Jazz laugh.

"Seriously," said Impactor, more loudly than he probably thought he was saying it, "I can't believe you put up with those fraggers for so long. You're worth ten of them—and that was *before* the Matrix."

"A nice sentiment, but better expressed after the event," said Mirage.

"How's he doing?"

"He's a perfect example of a rash young idiot trying to do a job far too big for him, he looks gorgeous, and he oozes clueless power all over the place," said Jazz. "He's got a half-dozen conjunx proposals already. Even Dominus's rivals think he's worth manipulating. He's doing great, Ratchet. And apparently your little intervention there helped rather than hurt, though I have to take Mirage's word for it."

Ratchet grumbled. "I hate watching those jumped-up rich idiots dismissing his work," he said. "He worked a thousand times harder than any of them, and he had the basic curiosity and honesty none of them did. He's a fragging good medic, Jazz." He gulped back the rest of his drink, stared at it, wondering how many he dared before someone would worry. "He should have stayed one."

"It was his choice," said Jazz. "And we do need a Prime. But we'll get through this, Ratchet. One day we'll be on the other end of all of this, and he can retire to finish his medical degree and open a practice with you."

"Do not," said Ratchet, pointing the empty glass at him, "give me that slag, kid. I know

when I'm being lied to."

"There might be a diplomatic solution, you never know," said Jazz. "Either way, we need to get seated for dinner."

The fact Megatron had even the smallest idea of what to do with the vast array of implements spread before him had everything to do with Jazz and Ratchet and Mirage sitting down with him and a mock table setting a few hours earlier, Ratchet mostly included because he was the one most likely to translate the whole thing into something Megatron was familiar with. Mirage gave the instructions, Ratchet coached both of them on how to think about it as a surgery, and it apparently had worked because no one had whacked Megatron upside the helm for using the wrong implement yet.

Adding to the confusion was Jazz, tapping his fingers against everything Megatron was served. He didn't like that; Ratchet had spent enough time drilling basic sanitary procedures into his helm that Megatron hated the idea of someone else touching *all* of his food. Very occasionally—once in the first course of a strongly flavored tiny cube of energon, once for a pile of glittering pink crystals—Jazz made a surprised noise and spirited the dish away from him.

"You really have a way of making friends," he whispered the second time, and Ironhide broke his façade of professional bodyguard to snicker.

Just after the pink crystals had been vanished, Megatron realized he'd been seated with an array of Iacon's most eligible unattached mecha when one of them tried to hand him energon, and Mirage made a panicked gulping noise. Megatron waived it politely aside, privately amused at Mirage's lack of faith in him.

They were all trying to get under his paneling, that much was obvious, but at least it meant all of them tried to make pleasant conversation and no one tried to make him look stupid.

"Did you really fight your way across an entire battlefield with only a shield to get to the wounded?" asked one of them, painted in brilliant greens and golds. He was tiny, expertly applied green paint making his optics even bigger, a touch of color on his lips and cheeks, and he stared up at Megatron with expectant adoration.

"Not exactly, no," said Megatron. "There was no fighting; I simply carried the shield to deflect blaster bolts while I did repairs."

"That's even braver!" said the one to his other side, determined not to be outdone. "Did the Matrix guide you? Protect you? We heard that it surrounded you with the sparks of Primes past to shield you from the enemy!"

"No, it didn't really." Megatron placed an unconscious hand over his chestplates, then realized the whole group of them were staring reverently at him. "It didn't have much of a role in it." He managed a wry little smile. "My shield broke and half my back got slagged. I couldn't recharge on anything but my ventral side for a week."

They looked scandalized, tittered.

"What was getting the Matrix like?" another asked. Big blue optics fixed on Megatron's

face as he leaned forward.

"Exceedingly painful," said Megatron. "It reformatted me almost entirely."

"You're so brave," another one sighed, leaning forward.

"We heard you're a poet," said the green one.

Megatron glanced sidelong and up to where Impactor stared stiffly into the middle distance. The way the corner of his mouth twitched upward undermined his stoic, innocent act.

"Of little skill," Megatron said.

"Oh, I doubt it," said the green mech. He leaned forward, optics half-shuttered coquettishly. "We'd be honored if you might share some with us."

Megatron certainly wasn't shy about sharing his work, and the request was a pleasant surprise. He was still proud of his poetry, even if he'd had no time to work on it since he'd been given the Matrix. He chose one of his only subtlety revolutionary ones, the one that was mostly about Messatine and returning back to a loved one (it had been Terminus, obviously), one that was both about the beauty of the universe and tinged with unspoken romance, with a hook in it of sadness, that there was no better life to give his beloved, that as beautiful as the planet could be, they were both of them trapped.

The young mecha around him sighed. "It's so romantic," said one.

"It's so *sad*," said another.

"The emotions are so perfect. You're very gifted. So skilled."

"I can't imagine ever being such a good poet."

Impactor was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"You *must* share more with us."

The response to this was a general clamor of approval, and one little red mech on the edge said, "We have a little group that meets sometimes. We could learn so much from you." He gave Megatron a small smile, and then tucked himself back into the crowd.

Megatron instantly liked him. It was the single most useful thing anyone had said all evening.

Then came the part he and the rest of his staff had all been dreading.

He was going to have to go into a room with all the other nobles of rank, and they would discuss the political situation. It meant continuing to pretend stupidity. Accept the sneers and smirks, and sit there while other people handled the important parts of this alliance.

He wasn't looking forward to it, but when Jazz tapped his shoulder, Megatron politely disentangled himself from his company, all of whom pouted artfully to see him go. It would have been a great deal more flattering if he didn't know for a certain fact that most of them were under orders to act easily pleased and smitten, in dire need of securing a good consort-ship. He found their mannerisms enraging, but wondered how many brilliant minds were buried under simpering exteriors that were their only hope of making a decent future for themselves.

One day, that too would change.

He hoped Mirage might corrupt them, at least a little.

"Now remember," Jazz said. "Sit there. Look pretty. Let us do the talking. The stupider they think you are, the better."

Megatron frowned at him.

"You'd be a lot more effective here if you could make that more of a pout than a *I will destroy you in your recharge* kind of expression. Keep working on it." Jazz thumped his shoulder.

So Megatron did as ordered. He sat still. He tried to ignore Phantasm sitting next to him. He looked as pretty as he was capable of looking, which he was fairly sure wasn't very. He let Jazz and Mirage and Ratchet do the talking. Even when he wanted to jump in and correct the idiots around him. Even when he wanted to rip Phantasm's throat out with a smile.

Jazz was already more or less doing that, though. The negotiations were not going in Phantasm's favor—nor the rest of his friends, for that matter. Megatron watched Phantasm's face twist with disdain and disapproval as he was repeatedly outmaneuvered, and then, when Jazz's attention was elsewhere, Phantasm passed a hand over Megatron's cube of fancy high grade.

Jazz might have had the chemoreceptors in his fingers, but Megatron was a medic—and furthermore, he'd been a miner. They'd often supplemented their rations with what scraps they could find, but many of the minerals energon was associated with could be actively toxic to Cybertronian frames. To survive, you needed more fuel than you got in the rations. And to make sure that didn't kill you, you needed to be able to identify the major toxins. Miner frames were better at processing contaminated energon than most—otherwise the turnover due to deaths would be impossibly high—but it could still kill you.

As a medic, Megatron had learned to identify even more poisons, and with a much greater degree of accuracy than previously.

So he took the cube and did all the subtle little tests he remembered, checking viscosity, smell, color. He even surreptitiously flicked out the handheld scanner he kept in subspace out of habit and had forgotten to remove before the evening's activities. Had he not found anything, he would have left the cube alone. But what his scanner and his senses told him was a familiar toxin.

It wasn't a very elegant one; it killed mecha by curdling the fuel in their lines. Low quantities induced vomiting as it curdled the fuel in your tanks. It was an experience Megatron had had many times in the mines. His filters were designed to catch it as it tried to enter his fuel systems and dump it back into his tank, where it could be safely, though incredibly unpleasantly, purged. But purging your tank out was better than dying.

This was a slightly higher concentration than he'd encountered previously. If he drank the whole thing, it was very possible he would indeed die of it. A mech like Mirage or Ratchet would certainly offline, without the filters to bring the poison down to a manageable level. But to make his point, he didn't need to drink the full cube.

He waited for a lull in the conversation and made optic contact with Phantasm, then lifted it and took three deliberate swallows. Then he returned to watching Jazz dismantle someone's argument, smiling.

Out of the corner of his optic, he saw Phantasm staring at him, aghast.

It was about twenty minutes later the discussion ended, fortunately just as Megatron's tank

began to gripe warningly. He saw Jazz pick up the cube on reflex, stir a finger into it and then stare at him with naked horror. Phantasm was already out the door, so he had no compunction in saying, "It's all right."

"Only if we get Ratchet to pump your fuel tank," hissed Jazz, putting the cube down. "What the frag, Megatron?"

"I've had worse," he said. "Worse of that, specifically. Common contaminant in miners' rations. My filters are built to handle it."

"Not at this concentration!" Jazz gestured to Ratchet and the others and started to herd Megatron out. "Primus mech, you better hope it hasn't reached your fuel lines."

"It hasn't. Still in my tank. And I know that because I'm going to be purging in a few minutes."

Jazz hissed a curse and dragged him along faster.

"What did he do?" said Ratchet. Megatron spared a moment to pull the scanner out and pass it to him, heard him curse.

"I've had it at higher concentrations before," Megatron said. "It was unpleasant, but I survived."

"I don't like hearing things like that," said Ratchet, a very weak protest.

"I'm fine," Megatron said, as they bundled him into the transport and Ratchet, ever practical, put a bucket in front of him, scanning him every few moments. "The important part is that Phantasm won't be trying to poison me anytime soon."

"You accepted a drink that had been around my creator for any length of time?" said Mirage, his voice shrilling.

"I knew the toxin."

"What if he used a combination?" Mirage looked at Ratchet.

"Well, there at least he got lucky," said Ratchet, after scanning Megatron for the seventh time. "I'm not picking up anything else. It's all concentrated in his tank. Megatron, you realize you're not going to stop purging just when it's out of your tank? And that I'm changing your filters, and that's going to suck slag?"

"Yes," said Megatron. "I didn't say I was going to enjoy this, just that it was necessary."

"Apparently deliberately drinking poison is necessary now," said Ratchet, deeply sarcastic, to the others. "Don't think you're getting any anti-nausea chips out of me, idiot."

"I know better than to ask," said Megatron, already contemplating the bottom of the bucket carefully, wondering how it would feel to just open his intake and let things take their course. Stubborn, he kept it clamped shut.

He resisted until they delivered him to his room, then vanished into the washracks and reexperienced the dinner in the most unpleasant and literal way possible.

"Well, you've gotten rid of the worst of it," said Ratchet from the doorway. "Hope you

enjoy the next six hours of purging. You total moron."

"He's not going to try to poison me again," said Megatron, satisfied despite the way his mouth tasted.

"Yeah right," said Ratchet, and came over to help him detach the jewelry from himself before it could get soiled. He brought Megatron's real helmet back when he returned, handing it over and shaking his head as Megatron fumbled to replace it. "Fragging hell kid. We told you to act dumb, but not that dumb."

"Worth it," said Megatron, and hoped he was right.

Chapter 75

"He is such a—," Jazz ran out of words and made a series of increasingly obscene hand gestures to convey the sentiment, each more violent than the last. "Seriously! Who does that?"

There was a sound of retching from the washracks.

"Wish I could say it's the stupidest thing he's ever done," said Ratchet. "How likely is it to work?"

"My creator is proud of his mastery of poisons," said Mirage. "He would have been very sure of killing Megatron before dosing his drink."

Megatron staggered out of the washracks. "Then send him a bottle of something. Something cheap. With my compliments, and maybe a note about it being a far more effective poison."

There was a pause, and a whistle of indrawn vents from Dominus.

"That's...a serious insult," said Mirage. "Are you sure you want to risk making an enemy of him?"

"He tried to kill me," Megatron pointed out, surprisingly mildly for a mech in the middle of purging his tank out. He gulped and vanished back into the washracks.

"Can we slip a camera into that package?" asked Dominus. "I want to see Phantasm's expression when he realizes it didn't work. And his expression the next time he sees Megatron."

"Don't you dare praise Megatron for this," said Ratchet. "I don't want him doing this again. *Ever. Again.*"

"All else aside," said Prowl, "we need him to put in an appearance tomorrow afternoon at Metalhawk's gathering, to demonstrate that he was unaffected."

The response to that was a groan from the washracks.

"Wages of sin," called Ratchet, unsympathetically.

"Well," said Dominus, "if he can pull it off—and by that, I mean, if he can detach himself from the washracks by morning and go out in public—it'll be a hell of a bit of theater and a pretty good political move."

"This usually only lasts four to six hours," came the response from the washracks.

"*How do you know that?*" snarled Ratchet.

"*Because miners get fueled on slag!*"

There was a silence.

"I *have* done this before," Megatron said into that silence, voice reproachful. "To be entirely honest, this doesn't even make the top worst three fuel poisonings I've had. Maybe not even the top *five*. Do you honestly think that anyone bothered to fuel miners well?"

"You don't build up immunities," Ratchet said. "That's not how toxins work."

"But miners have heavy duty filters," Megatron said. "It's expensive to replace us. Cheaper to build us with redundant filters than to do that, or to fuel us with anything but the lowest of low grades. Believe me, I could have drunk another quarter of that cube and survived; I just didn't feel like purging my tank that much longer."

"I'm glad you didn't," said Jazz. "We don't feel like listening to you purge your tank that much longer."

"You could just leave."

"Nope. We need to talk about how that party went, and what we'll need to look out for next time. Including not letting you alone near any drinks, apparently."

Ratchet had been quiet a few moments, then said in appalled tones, "Is *that* why you and Terminus's fuel systems were such a slugging mess when I first checked the pair of you over?"

"Yes," said Megatron, evidently gratified by the change in subject. "That would be why."

Ratchet shook his helm, disgusted. Pulled out an anti-nausea chip from his kit, as well as a syringe and a toxicity monitor, and went back into the bathroom while Jazz and the rest of the staff continued to debate outside.

"Let's just check if you've purged what you need to," he told Megatron. "Like frag I'm leaving any of that scrap in your tank."

"Be my guest," said Megatron, and let himself be scanned, poked, and sampled.

"There," Ratchet said encouragingly, and handed him the chip. "Won't be magic, of course, but should help a great deal."

Megatron quickly fumbled the chip into a port and groaned his relief. "I wish we'd had those in the mines."

"I bet," said Ratchet. "This doesn't give you a free pass, though. Don't you dare pull anything that slugging stupid again, kid."

Megatron gave him a crooked smile. "I'll try."

"Good. Get rinsed off and come back out here. We've still got work to do."

Megatron ached all over, but he'd gone and done a shift feeling worse. While still purging, in fact. No one had remarked on it at the time because the fuel had sickened the entire mine. Surely it wouldn't be so bad to sit in his receiving room and talk to his staff.

It was.

"Can we stop dissecting Tyrest's facial expression?" he said at last, sounding more put upon than he meant to. He put it down to the helmache. "I met him for all of ten seconds and I'm not sure even Jazz can tell exactly what was going through his head."

They looked at him, some pitying, some annoyed. Megatron frowned back at them.

"You really aren't a politician," said Mirage with a heavy vent. "Tyrest is an important mech, and a potentially valuable ally, Megatron. We may need him."

"You just spent five minutes dissecting what he meant by the slant of his wings," said Megatron. "There's useful analysis and then there's just speculation. He's probably making up *his* mind."

"He's probably not wrong," Ratchet pointed out. "Megatron's maybe a little impatient, but I'm thinking the best thing all of us can do is head to our berths. We've got that—what, garden party?—tomorrow afternoon. Let's prepare for that by recharging. Oh, and we've got to get this idiot out in public so everyone knows he's fine, that's a thing we need to do as well."

"Right," said Prowl. "There's an eatery down the street with decent vantage points for a security detail. We'll go there."

Megatron didn't know where to start on what was alien to him in that sentence. He settled for, "A security detail," in a flat tone.

"You have a naturally winning personality and I'm sure someone's going to try and kill you," said Jazz cheerfully. "For the sixth time since you got here."

"I only counted three."

Jazz gave him a dazzling grin. "You missed a few!"

Megatron sighed. "Fine. Security detail it is. Just let them fuel along with me. I'm tired of other mecha waiting on me. That's not the sort of leader I want to be."

"They'll fuel beforehand," said Prowl, firmly.

"But we'll make sure it's the same stuff," Jazz hurried to put in. "Would that help?"

Megatron frowned.

"It's going to have to help," said Prowl mercilessly. "Because it's going to be what'll happen. Regardless of your opinions. The garden party, now... Sunstreaker, after he gets back in the morning, you'll need to do the touch up."

"The touch up?" said Megatron, sounding horrified even to himself.

"You look good, but it's an evening style," Mirage clarified. "Sunstreaker won't need to make many changes, but were you to show up painted like that at an afternoon function, as versus an evening one, you would not be taken seriously."

"Should I be getting accustomed to changing my paint multiple times a day?" Megatron asked, hearing the edge in his own voice.

"Yes."

He stared at them. The sheer obscenity of it made him feel ill. He'd been repainted only two or three times between when he'd come online and when he'd been reformatted into a medic. It had been an expensive, extensive process, and after each repainting he'd done his best to keep it looking good, at least for a little while, because it had been so expensive. Everyone did. Everyone went around with their hi-viz tape peeling, trying to stick it down in hopes of making it last a little longer, because the charges the company slapped on a replacement were so high.

And here he was getting repainted twice in the same day. And this was supposed to be normal.

It was a disgusting waste of time and resources.

"Stop looking rebellious," Prowl said. "You can't let your pride get in the way of defeating the Decepticons. This is temporary, but it's important. We'll find you some battlefield to run around saving people on soon enough."

"Fine," said Megatron, his tone making it clear it was anything but. "Now get out of my room and let me get some recharge."

He shoosed them all out except for Ratchet who hesitated. "You doing all right?"

"My tank aches," said Megatron. "But that's to be expected."

Ratchet snorted. "I know you don't like any of this," he said. "You don't like being poked and prodded and you don't like any of the cultural trappings, and I doubt those medical students were whispering sweet nothings in your audials."

Megatron sighed. "I'm doing well enough," he said, hoping he sounded convincing and comforting.

"Yeah right," said Ratchet. "Look, go spar with Ironhide after you get done with this little performance they're having you put on this morning. It'll do you good, and Sunstreaker will be touching up your paint anyway."

The prospect of imminent violence sent a happier hum through Megatron's systems. Another reason he'd been right to decline becoming a medic; something deep in him *enjoyed* Ironhide and Impactor's training, enjoyed battle.

Ratchet, a proper medic, didn't. Didn't like hurting people. Didn't like fighting.

But by the way Ratchet gave him a small smile, Ratchet understood perfectly well the pleasure Megatron took in that sparring, and didn't condemn him for it. There was more relief there than Megatron wanted to admit to.

He still wasn't sure of himself, or in himself. He knew who he'd been before being shadowplayed. It wasn't who he was now; that mech was lost. He had been gentle, and idealistic, and totally unable to comprehend the cruelties that the Functionists had in store for him. He'd loved Terminus. He'd believed he could change the world with his writing. He'd believed that violence wouldn't change anything. That deep down, even the Functionists were mostly decent mecha.

What he was now was all hard edges and a deep rage. He couldn't regret it. There was power in what he'd become. He wasn't helpless anymore, and he knew he was what he needed to be. The mech he had been before the shadowplay might have been hidden and dreaming all the time he'd lived with that shadowplay, but that didn't mean his experiences in Ratchet's clinic, in the academy, hadn't changed him.

And then there was the Matrix.

As he thought of it, it stirred around his spark. Curiosity and amusement. What had prompted him to acknowledge it, after all this time? It had been waiting.

He pushed it firmly aside. It had only been waiting for a handful of days, it could wait longer.

It thought he was amusing.

Ratchet waved a hand in front of his optics, then scanned him. "Still in there? Did it affect your processor?"

"The Matrix," said Megatron by way of explanation, as Ratchet's scanner peeped and flashed a healthy blue.

"Yeah, go to berth," said Ratchet. "Comm me if anything happens. I'll check on you in the morning. Try to get a little energon in you, would you? Just sip it. Try the stuff with bubbles, it usually settles the tank."

"Bubbles," said Megatron, flatly, and stared at the dispenser, which had more buttons than any other dispenser he'd seen in his function. Ratchet huffed a laugh. "Come on, I'll show you."

A few moments later found Megatron with a small cube of fizzing fuel in his hand and settling into berth. The bubbles did indeed make it a little easier to swallow, and didn't sit on his tank like the lead ball fuel usually felt like after a fuel poisoning. He sipped, very carefully, put the fuel aside on the nightstand and settled into berth with a datapad.

He was in recharge before he could remember to take another sip.

Prowl and Jazz were not recharging.

Jazz never recharged well immediately after a big mission. He was usually too, well, *jazzed*. He'd spent too long too keyed-up and paranoid and his systems wouldn't settle easily into recharge without a good hard reset. That could be done medically.

It could also be done via a good hard overload or three.

And that evening's party had been a mission and a difficult one at that, because usually the people Jazz was working with took not being *poisoned* as a desirable thing. They didn't just go and *drink poison on purpose*.

"I mean, who the frag does that?" he demanded, for the dozenth time.

Prowl raised his head and sighed. "If you're still asking that, I'm evidently not doing a good job," he said.

"What? No, Prowler, you're fine, you're good, but seriously, he *drank poison*."

"Ah. I'm *fine*," Prowl said, stopped what he was doing entirely, and propped his chin on Jazz's pelvic plating. "Is the near-death of our Prime, who you obviously have decided is your exclusive responsibility, preventing your mission protocols from offlining, or are you intentionally bringing this thread up repeatedly because you can't leave it alone for emotional reasons?"

"Neither!" said Jazz, realized it wasn't true and pressed the heels of his hands against his visor. "Both. I don't know!"

"Mmm," said Prowl. "We could get Ratchet in here to medically reset your protocols, if that might work better. Or First Aid. I'd suggest Megatron, since he's right there, but he has been purging his tank inside out for a good portion of the night and probably does need his recharge."

"Fzzzzzt!" said Jazz. Thinking about Megatron, in berth, when his spike was out, was not helping anything. It was—it was highly, highly embarrassing. Sure, he and Prowl did plan to find someone to trine-conjunx, one day, but... but...

Prowl gave him a knowing look. It lost neither dignity nor smugness despite Prowl's current location.

"Medic, or do I keep trying to frag you?" he asked.

Jazz lowered his arms, forcibly pushing the emotional conflict and distress over Megatron and the remembered *panic* as the scan of the drink had come back out of his mind. "Frag me, please?"

Prowl just looked at him for another few moments, then straightened up, sliding a finger into Jazz's wet valve. Jazz groaned and relaxed into it.

"Being, effectively, second and third in command of the Autobot army is certainly going to cut into our personal time," Prowl said, extremely professional for someone doing *that* with their thumb. "At least we have some privacy. But we are going to have to be better about firewalling our professional lives from our personal; we *both* have a tendency to continue working far past what's reasonable, and to bring it home with us."

"Says the mech fingering me!" said Jazz.

"Exactly my point." Prowl sounded smug, two fingers now spreading Jazz's valve and sending delicious bolts of sensation up his spinal strut. He ground down against the thumb on his node, gasping at the sensation.

"And," added Prowl, still smiling at him, "should we indeed find anyone we'd like to bring into our relationship, we owe them better than that."

Jazz managed a snort. "We're about to be up to our optics in a war, Prowl. I seriously doubt we'll find anyone interesting, or interested, for a *while*."

"Of course," said Prowl, too mildly by far. Jazz was a little too distracted by the curl and stretch of the fingers in him to analyze what that might mean, suspicious though it was. He whimpered, hands clenching on the recharge slab. "Prowl, don't tease!"

Prowl's doorwings fluttered with amusement, but he didn't seem any more in the mood for teasing than Jazz was. He removed his fingers and crawled up onto the slab, hitching Jazz's leg up and over one of his hips. "You know, I'm a little sorry we don't still have that red metalmesh rope," he said, the jaggedness of his vents belying his casual tone. His spike nudged at Jazz's entrance.

Jazz moaned and bucked up against it, rubbing the hot blunt end of Prowl's spike over his node and valve. "You wanna see me tied up?" It was an appealing thought. The extra measure of surrender thrilled him, when he was in the mood.

"Yes." Prowl's voice was a rough growl, and he held Jazz still and guided himself in. It had been a while since they'd had the luxury of doing this, and Jazz had to pause for a moment, gasping, with just the head of Prowl's spike in him. It was so much. So much better than hasty fingers and strictly muffled gasps in the semi-privacy of their shelter in the refugee camp. He didn't

want to overload too quickly.

Prowl nuzzled at his neck, tilting his head aside to kiss and nip gently at the cables there until Jazz nodded and he sank slowly into Jazz. Jazz lay there, gasping, imagining he could feel each ring of his calipers opening in sequence, Prowl seated deep inside of him, his valve stretching around the thick base of Prowl's spike.

Prowl was a being of supernatural patience. He stayed like that a few moments, not moving, then slowly circled his hips while Jazz squirmed and gasped under him, waiting until Jazz broke and said, "Please, please frag me!"

Prowl withdrew, then snapped his hips forward hard, driving a small gasping cry from Jazz. Stretched and ready, it felt *good*. "Yes, more, like that, please Prowler!"

Prowl reached up, gently entwining their fingers and then pinning Jazz's hands to either side of his helm on the berth, leaning forward to claim his intake in a kiss as he set a rapid, deliberate pace. Jazz kissed back, was soon reduced to gasping, relishing the feeling of Prowl's spike in him, whimpering each time it pressed hard against the sensitive cluster of nodes at the apex of his valve, at the elaborations at the base of Prowl's spike against his anterior node.

He overloaded with a muffled whimper. Prowl groaned with satisfaction, slowing until Jazz's overload had passed, then withdrew and urged him onto his front. Jazz adjusted, happily. His mission protocols were definitely off by now, but he wasn't going to say no to a second overload. He felt Prowl's hard, damp spike bump the inside of his thigh, a firm hand on his hip, and he spread his legs and canted his hips to better present his valve.

"What an appealing display," purred Prowl, something that would have been far too clinical from any other mech but from Prowl was a genuine compliment, turned Jazz's engine like nothing else. Prowl pressed into him again, the new position hitting different nodes, and reached down and around Jazz to fist his spike.

Prowl's pace now was much more punishing. Jazz turned his face to one side and gasped with each thrust, along for the ride and delighted by it. It wasn't long before Prowl overloaded into him, the movement of his hand on Jazz's spike speeding until Jazz overloaded too.

They stayed like that for a moment before Prowl withdrew and staggered on visibly unsteady legs to get some cloths and solvent to clean up with. Jazz watched him, rolled on his side, contently admiring that aft, the tired but happy slant of the doorwings. "Your aft is amazing," he said, and the amused glare Prowl shot him told him that wasn't nearly as romantic as it should have been.

Prowl returned with the cloths and solvent and they cleaned one another up, Prowl leaning in for a kiss as he ran a cloth up the inside of Jazz's thigh, a gentle stroke over his panel. Jazz was tired enough he knew round 2 would be a bad idea, but he wished he weren't.

They remedied that early in the morning. Prowl rolled over and pressed himself up against Jazz's back, hips canting forward against Jazz's aft. Jazz chuckled, sleepy and content. "No time like the present, huh?" He opened his panels, and one of Prowl's arms wrapped around his waist and draped down to play with his node.

They fragged slow and lazy and content. Prowl moved from Jazz's node to his spike, stroking him to hardness, Jazz moving against him with sharp little breaths. Prowl was incredible with his hands.

Prowl rolled him onto his back and straddled him, his other hand already between his legs, readying his valve with efficient strokes. Jazz bit his lip, eyes fixed on the movement of Prowl's fingers. All these years conjunxed, and it never got any less sexy to watch him getting ready to take Jazz's spike. A few seconds of that performance and Jazz was so hard he *hurt*.

He reached down to fist his spike. Prowl pushed his wrist aside. "Be patient," he said, his mouth quirking with amusement.

Jazz let out a frustrated huff and pressed his hands down on the berth. Most of the mecha in command he knew loved surrendering it in the berth. Prowl was an exception. He got off as much on being in charge as he did the actual fragging, carefully planning and orchestrating every second of his partner's experience.

Jazz could see the appeal. Sometimes he liked being the one in charge, sometimes surrendering was thrill enough. If they did find a third mech they both wanted to trine, Jazz sincerely hoped they preferred submission. The idea of conspiring with Prowl about what to do to a partner was hot as frag.

Prowl lowered himself. Jazz hissed, helm pressing back into the berth's padding at the feeling of hot slick around the tip of his spike. Prowl looked smug, slowly lowering himself further. Jazz's hands clawed in the berth padding. He couldn't help himself. He bucked up into that tight heat.

Prowl gasped, bracing himself on Jazz's chest, a break in his cool calm façade. Jazz grinned. So Prowl wasn't set just on dominance this morning, and that suited Jazz just fine. He bucked his hips a few more times, watching Prowl's head tilt back, his mouth fall open, and then Prowl seemed to catch control of himself and resume riding him in earnest. It was all Jazz could do to reach up and hold onto Prowl's hips, his vents growing ragged, thrusting up into rippling heat.

Prowl overloaded hard, optics flaring, spike jetting transfluid over Jazz's abdomen. He rolled his hips a few more times, paused gasping. Jazz's hands clenched on his waist, waiting for the post overload sensitivity to abate, then pistoned up into Prowl until he overloaded as well, spilling plunged to the root in his mate.

Prowl moaned again, slumping down over him, mouth seeking his. Eventually he climbed off, Jazz's spike sliding out of him, already mostly depressurized.

They lay like that for a while, then stretched out side by side with a mutual sigh of contentment, Jazz pressing flush against Prowl's side. "Dear fragging Primus," said Jazz. "I needed that."

"The feeling is mutual," said Prowl. His doorwings fluttered a little against the berth. "It's been months since we've had anything like privacy."

"Or a lack of emergencies," said Jazz.

At that moment, the comm on the berthside table rang. "Oh frag," said Jazz, and got it.

"I apologize for disturbing you," said Megatron's voice, "but I have a young noble at my door. He wants to come in, and says that he'll be offlined if I don't let him in. Assistance would be appreciated."

"Oh for Primus's sake," said Jazz, and Prowl next to him let out a sparkfelt groan.

"On our way," said Jazz to the comm and then rolled out of bed. "Come on, let's get there

before the stupid idealistic fragger lets the twit in."

"Right," said Prowl, sounding as alarmed as Jazz felt. "But wash first!"

Right. They were both covered in transfluid. Jazz bolted for the washracks, Prowl right behind him.

Chapter 76

Megatron looked down at the small bot in front of him.

Wide terrified optics looked back at him.

It had taken several moments to correctly identify the mech as the small red mech who had offered him an invitation to the poetry group. He'd been repainted entirely except for his faceplate; his helm was now white, his body blue. And gone was the flirtatious confidence he'd shown. He was genuinely frightened.

"What's your name?" Megatron asked, as gently as he could on only a handful of hours of sleep and with everything still aching.

"Tracks," said the mech. "My name's Tracks."

"And you're here because...?"

Tracks stared up at him. His mouth opened and closed and then he looked away and muttered, "My family's put me at your disposal."

Megatron frowned at him. Tracks seemed to shrink.

"I'm...I'm supposed to get caught in your quarters," he told his pedes. "So they can claim you disgraced me and get you to conjunx me. I'm sorry, they said they'd decommission me if I failed."

Megatron knew all about decommissioning. He'd been threatened with it enough himself. He didn't expect to hear it from the mouth of a noblemech, still less one so young. "Why the frag would they do that?"

"I've got two batchmates," Tracks said, still addressing the floor. "I'm the least accomplished. This is the only thing I'm sparked for. If I can't do that I'm a waste of resources and I've already ruined my chances of a match with most of the other nobles."

"Primus," muttered Megatron, and glanced back at the closed door of his quarters. He wanted to go back to berth. He wanted to rescue the kid—and while the mech certainly had his final upgrades, he was so much younger Megatron couldn't help but borrow Ratchet's terminology. But if he let the kid in...

"I can't conjunx anyone," he said bluntly. "My previous partner died. The wound is too raw."

Tracks shrank in on himself.

"But if your creators won't have you, we will," he said. "You're welcome among my Autobots. No one will let you be decommissioned here." Tracks met his optics, startled. "You're safe with us."

Which was when Jazz and Prowl arrived at a dead run. Megatron looked them over. They were still beaded with solvent from the washracks, which unfortunately hadn't been enough to clean all the paint transfers off.

At least some of his command staff had a good love life.

Megatron turned his attention back to the new bot. "These are my second and third in command," he told the mech. "We'll find a place for you, if you want one."

Jazz paused and held up a hand. "Wait. Wait. Who is this, and why are we offering him a place?"

"This is Tracks," said Megatron. "I believe his creators sent him to seduce me. I can assure you that he was extremely unsuccessful."

"I'd hope so!" said Jazz. His focus settled on Tracks, who winced despite being bigger than him. "You'd better tell me everything you just told him, mech. Right now."

Tracks gulped. "I'm supposed to come here and ask for entry and tell Megatron Prime my house has put me at his disposal."

Jazz hissed air from his side vents, obviously startled. "That's unusually blatant of them."

"They want me to get caught in his quarters," said Tracks to his feet.

"So they can demand a conjunxing."

Tracks bobbed his head in a small nod.

"Well, that's not going to happen," said Jazz, no mercy in his voice. "You'd better go back and tell them as much."

Tracks's optics flared bright with fear. "They told me they'd decommission me if I didn't succeed."

"That's unfortunate, but not my problem." Jazz folded his arms and stared up at the noble, visor cold.

"Jazz," said Megatron, horrified.

Jazz pulled him aside. "I've got no doubt they threatened him," he said. "But he's a custom-sparked flyer, even if he also has a ground-alt. He's expensive. They're not just going to throw him away over this. Make his life miserable, sure, but—"

"We're not returning him," said Megatron firmly. He'd longed for the power to protect people all his function. Now he had it, he wasn't about to let some poor stupid young noble suffer his family's rage for his own failure to act. "I've offered him refuge. I'm not rescinding that offer."

"He could be a spy or an assassin," Jazz pointed out. "And they're not going to give him up easily."

Megatron stared coldly down at him. He'd thought better of Jazz. "You are my spymaster, are you not?" he asked. "Then find a way to *make it work*. If we were selective about who we brought in, we might as well go back to Optimus."

He went back to Tracks and Prowl. "Prowl. Jazz. Find Dominus and figure out a way to let Tracks here stay with the minimum of fuss, if he so desires. Kick him out, and you'll be explaining your actions to me." He stared at each in turn, then turned his attention to Tracks. "If you do join us, I expect you to do so with your whole spark. There are a lot of mecha here for whom this is

their only refuge. You will not play politics with that, you will not put them in danger, or I will have no hesitation in expelling you, do you understand me?"

He looked at all of them with the stern frown he'd learned from Ratchet. "Good. Get this sorted out. Prowl, Jazz, I expect the solution to Tracks' family over morning fuel. In the meantime, I need to finish cleaning up."

He closed the door, firmly, then huffed out a long vent and headed back to the washracks to finish polishing scuffs off his armor.

"A wardship," said Jazz over breakfast, leaning forward. "That's the solution. You offer Tracks' family a wardship. Means you're sort of his mentor or legal guardian."

"He's of age," Megatron protested. "He's been off the assembly line more than a week, he should have integrated all his basic functioning information packets by now."

Mirage let out a little sigh. "He's a consort-class mech, Megatron." He looked around at the other faces at the table. Prowl made a little *no, go on* gesture at him. Mirage sighed again. "The noble houses custom commission mecha as heirs and consorts. The usual rule is 'heir and a spare'—you spark one mech to lead the household when you die, one as backup if he offlines early. That happens a lot. Heirs are expected to do military service as officers and then come back to take on some of the administrative burden. The 'spare' usually winds up in some brief professional training in medicine, law, or the priesthood. They then go into that profession if they aren't needed, or gets made a consort if the household needs to make an extra alliance. They're usually treated better than a traditional consort, however; it's something of a mark of esteem to be offered a mech like that in an alliance.

"Consorts are sparked specifically as consorts. They're given in arranged conjunxing ceremonies to cement alliances between households. Their..." and here Mirage trailed off and looked deeply embarrassed, "their inexperience in interface is the most important thing about them, culturally speaking. It doesn't matter how accomplished a mech is, if they've interfaced outside of a conjunx bond, they're useless to the family as far as alliances are concerned. Accomplished here, by the way, means in the arts, literature, music, dancing, and so on. Military or scientific interest or endeavors are strongly discouraged. Essentially," Mirage's mouth twisted bitterly, "they want you to become an adornment for your conjunx, rather than a person in your own right. There's some political training, however; they do want you capable of persuading your conjunx to do what's advantageous to your household, rather than theirs.

"To keep control of consorts, the nobility has generally agreed that they have to be closely supervised. To effect this, they've stripped them of legal independent standing; a consort, even once conjunxed, cannot make legal or financial decisions in their own name. They cannot open accounts or start business ventures, they cannot even make purchases except with the permission of their guardians, whether that be their commissioners or their spouses. They cannot travel outside of the inner city of Iacon without permission and an escort. They cannot bring suit in a court of law, regardless of the crimes committed against them. That decision rests in the hands of their guardians.

"For the purposes of further educating their consort-class mecha, households will sometimes induct them into wardships, where they spend a certain amount of their time under the

guardianship of another household. That's what we're proposing to do with young Tracks; we'll treat the Autobots as a household of their own, with you as the head of that household. Tracks was entirely correct; his family is entirely capable of decommissioning him for failing to fulfill his one function, which is to make an advantageous conjunxing—of you, apparently. But if you take him on as a ward, it saves his function and, to them, gets him into a better political position. Having the Prime as your guardian is quite prestigious. It also means they won't get to do anything to him without your approval."

Megatron tried to find words and failed, horrified. The cube of very tasty midgrade with lead shavings, and the small plate of pillowy confections which he still couldn't fully identify but had decided he loved, sat forgotten in front of him.

"That's the same status as disposables," he said at last, a little staticky.

"It is," said Mirage. "Your basic comforts are looked out for. You fuel well, you recharge on a comfortable berth, there's always someone to polish or detail you or provide you with delicacies. But you must adhere to a rigid set of rules and expectations, and hand your spark and frame over to the mech your family chooses for you without hesitation or complaint. If you break any of these rules—and you now have a good idea of how labyrinthine they are—it's not only mine supervisors who are endlessly inventive in devising punishments. My household had someone specially employed for it. He was very good at not leaving any marks."

Mirage took a deep vent. "Technically, Phantasm would be fully justified in killing me for abandoning my duty," he added. It was addressed to the table. "And for conjunxing a commoner. Hound was one of the gardeners. But he helped me escape."

"Phantasm won't touch you," said Megatron, meaning it. "Very well. We'll take Tracks into wardship. Much as I loathe being handed that power over another mech."

"It's the best possible solution for him," said Mirage quietly. "Believe me. You *are* saving his life."

"The justification," said Prowl, "is that any household letting an unbonded consort wander that freely isn't taking proper care of their people. That'll damage his family's standing, but not so much they'll feel they'll have to defend it."

Megatron shook his helm. Then paused, thinking. "How many more consorts are in this city? How many could I bring into wardships?"

"Oh Primus," said Jazz softly.

"It will take time," said Prowl, diplomatically. "Here's the speech you'll make to take Tracks as a ward. You should enjoy that; it's a public humiliation of his guardians. Now. Other matters."

Mirage slid a datapad across the table. "This morning's societal news."

Megatron looked. There he was, looking startled at the table with the consort-class mecha around him, all leaning in attentively. The implement in his hand was circled in red. *Wrong Fork!!!* exclaimed the text next to it. The headline said, *Prime Mistakes! "Unrefined" Megatron Prime Makes Waves at First Social Function!*

Under it, *Miner, Medic, Revolutionary—and Social Disaster! 50 Gaffes to Make You Laugh!*

It made Megatron laugh, at least. It was so utterly alien to his experience, to anything he could imagine, that he'd be featured in something like this for such a reason. His general expectations for ending up in a news publication had generally included being executed and not much more. Maybe, if he'd allowed himself dreams of vainglory, one of his essays being featured.

Not his misuse of unnecessary serving implements.

"Yeah, we're gonna have to work on that," said Jazz. "On the plus side, you don't seem like a threat to them?" At Megatron's thunderous expression in response to *that*, he quickly added, "Remember, we don't *want* you to seem like a threat to them!"

Megatron grumbled low in his vocalizer, but let it be.

"So, refresher on etiquette," said Mirage, then looked at Megatron's face and had mercy. "Remember, most people in Iacon's nobility have years to prepare for what you tried to learn in a couple of hours. We're quite literally raised for this. It's no failure on your part. What else?"

"We have about ten hours before the garden party," said Prowl. "Etiquette, detailing—oh. We've found you a strategy tutor."

"Strategy?" said Megatron.

"Military strategy," said Prowl, and Megatron relaxed. Finally, something useful.

"Also a specialist in diplomacy," said Jazz. "You really do need to work on that, mech. You just jump to the continuation of diplomacy by other means." He grinned like he'd made a joke; Prowl gave him an irritated look.

"What Jazz means is you need to learn how to resolve conflicts in ways other than starting a war. It seems Tyrest did indeed think well of you; he's volunteered for the position."

Megatron thought about the big, stuffy mech and made a face.

"Yeah. That there's the problem," said Jazz. "Primus, Ratchet, how far away from the staff did you have to keep him?"

"Wasn't a problem," said Ratchet, rather coldly. "When he was in the academy, he was scared of his own shadow and never went making faces like that in front of everyone. Progress is progress."

It quelled the others for a bit. Prowl and Jazz were suddenly very interested in their datapads. Ratchet gave Megatron a private smile and reached out to pat his arm, then leaned in.

"Don't let them spook you," he said. "You're doing great, kid. This is stupid but you've already made allies."

"Thank you, Ratchet," said Megatron quietly.

"They're all real afts," said Ratchet. "Every last one of em. I love watching you scare the scrap out of them."

There was a merry 'ping!' from one of Jazz's datapads. He looked and his face dropped. "Aw, scrap."

"What?" said Prowl.

Jazz showed it to him.

"Scrap," said Prowl. He showed it to Mirage.

Mirage didn't swear, but his optics blanched pale. He turned the datapad around so that Megatron could see it.

Evidently, Phantasm had heard of Megatron's miraculous recovery. It was an invitation to services at Phantasm's preferred chapel.

"This is a remarkable favor," said Mirage, in tones that indicated he felt it anything but. "However, the fact he's extending it to you is only to oblige you to come and attend these services. And if he still prefers the sects that he did when I was coming up in his household, what this will actually be will be a carefully orchestrated humiliation."

"Please elaborate," said Megatron, who didn't like the idea of obligation in conjunction with religion or humiliation.

"He prefers a Functionist slant. Not an extreme one, but the sort that encourages the extreme Functionists and winks at the worst of their behavior."

"Ah," said Megatron.

"And, in order to be polite and convey your appreciation to your host, you'll be expected to sit there and listen attentively," said Prowl.

"Scrap," said Ratchet, while Megatron stared at the datapad, disgusted.

"Will I be required to do anything?" he asked. "I've never been to religious services before."

That all stopped them in their tracks, even Ratchet.

"They were offered in the mines, but people weren't very interested," Megatron said. "We had better things to do on our offshifts, for the most part. And the mines only hired Functionist officiants. It was bad enough being down in the dark without someone telling you that was the only place you'd ever belong."

"Keep that to yourself," said Mirage. "Or they might try to ceremonially cleanse you and none of us, *none of us*, want that to happen."

"Lucky slag," muttered Jazz. "All right. Time to go. Let's get Megs here prettied up..." He paused and sighed. Megatron was hastily clearing his plate of the delightful confections. If he was going to have to sit through hours and hours of religious slag instead of beating the scrap out of his friends (and having them beat the scrap out of him), he was going to do it on a full tank, and with the satisfaction of a new delicacy. "...let's get Megs prettied up once he's done with the foamed energon puffs. You know those also come with mercury filling, too?"

Megatron did not try to talk with his mouth full. He looked up inquiringly instead.

"Tomorrow," Jazz promised. "If the church is still standing."

"Tomorrow," said Ratchet, a counter, "especially if you burn the place to the ground."

Chapter 77

Megatron tried to hold onto that promise as he allowed himself to be led into the chapel in question. If he'd felt dubious about the House of Ambus and its interior décor, this was worse. This was wealth for wealth's sake, with no sense of purpose or taste or restraint. And it was all in Primus's name.

Disgust bubbled in him. This is what faith meant to most mecha? He leveled a glare at the massive statue, Primus looking as warlike as it was possible for inanimate gold to look. *Is this why you reformatted me?* he demanded of the Matrix.

He was pretty sure it laughed at him.

"I always wondered why they like Primus in his warrior incarnation so much," said Rung softly from about waist height. "The older myths have him in a lot of other roles, including that of a healer of frame, spark and mind alike. Personally, those always resonated with me more."

Megatron glanced down at the small mech, whom he hadn't gotten to know well yet. "You didn't need to come to this, you know," he said. "Personally, I would have taken the opportunity to avoid it."

Rung smiled serenely. "The services held by the great houses always amuse me. The extents that the powerful will go to twist our shared stories to support their cruelties is remarkable, and I hold that it is a healthy and healing thing to laugh in the face of evil."

Megatron stared at him a few moments, wondering briefly how old, exactly, Rung was. "I sincerely hope you can keep sharing these observations with me," he said aloud. "I am...not looking forward to this."

That smile again, extremely kind, and Rung put out a hand as if to pat Megatron's arm before he withdrew it. "Of course."

"Just *behave*, you two," hissed Mirage behind them. He sounded resigned. Megatron wasn't surprised; Mirage had given him a long, long list of things to do and things not to do and he was certain that even with the best of intentions, he wasn't going to manage to adhere to them.

After five minutes in here, his intentions were anything but the best.

"Just... try not to disgrace yourself," muttered Mirage, and Megatron wasn't sure if he was addressing him or praying to Primus, but either way Rung was looking just as unrepentant and imminently troublesome as he felt, so that was better than it could have been.

They managed to end up in seats several rows back from the very front, and Megatron staunchly refused to be moved forward. Following Mirage's instructions, he protested that he wouldn't *dream* of putting himself forward, he was but one of Primus's children and as equal here as the rest of them, and that he did not want to cause any distraction.

Rung had a hand over his mouth by the time they were left alone, trying not to snicker. "I must congratulate you at being particularly good at telling them what they want to hear," he said. "It's a useful skill."

Megatron leaned in. "That, and Mirage is sitting directly behind me. I wouldn't put it past him to hit me with one of these data...scrolls?" He prodded at the rolled up objects in the container

in the back of the seat in front of them. There were a lot of them.

"Yes, one's probably for the hymns, and a few copies of the Covenant and...I'm not sure about the rest, honestly." Rung reached forward. "Let's see how thoroughly these have been doctored."

They spent a fairly happy twenty minutes going through one, Rung pointing out all the inaccuracies, until Phantasm and the officiant arrived and Megatron had to greet them.

The priest in question was a small mech, beautifully painted in white and silver. He stared up at Megatron, not quite managing to hide the flicker of distaste that crossed his face. It smoothed away quickly enough. "Megatron Prime," he said. "It's an honor."

I doubt it, thought Megatron, looking down at the sincere small smile and the bright optics and knowing every expression of friendliness as a lie. "Likewise," he said aloud.

"I'm honored to host you and your mecha," said the priest. "My name is Ecclesiastimus. I hope today's services will open your minds and sparks and give you comfort." He glanced at Phantasm. "We are all children of Primus, after all."

"Of course," said Megatron, inclining his head, and he was very glad that Rung's mutter of, "Primus must have been *very* busy, then," came only after the little group with Ecclesiastimus had left.

Megatron *somehow* managed to keep a straight face.

"With them being so unruly," said Rung, still perfectly innocent. "I think they're about to begin. Here." He patted the pew next to him, and Megatron sat.

Prowl tapped him on the shoulder. "Remember," he said softly, almost lost in the sudden swell of music, "they're very likely to insult us repeatedly. Do not rise to the bait."

Megatron thought he was ready to be insulted, but it was worse than he expected. After a certain amount of drivel he doubted the priest believed about all Cybertronians being equal in the optics of Primus (if so, why would Primus allow His children to be so mistreated? What about the starveling newbuilds in the Dead End? What about....) the priest moved to what he clearly thought was the exciting part of the ceremony.

"Each and every one of us is created with a *purpose*," he said, as if it were the most wonderful thing anyone could be told. "Primus has formed each and every one of you with care, to serve as cogs in the great Cybertronian machine. Every one of you has a role. A function. Every function is *important*. You are made for it. It is your God-given *destiny*. Many other species are not as lucky as we are; we are uniquely blessed in knowing what we are, who we are, and *how we can serve* from the moment our sparks emerge and take residence in our frames. You are perfect as you are. Rejoice in what you are and in what Primus made you to be, for we all *rely* on you being the best He made you to be."

Functionism. Dressed up in religious trappings. Megatron didn't even realize he was baring his dentae until Prowl jabbed him hard in the back.

"He's not even original," murmured Rung.

"Behave," growled Prowl.

"...with people like *you*, He has endowed with superior thought. With moral *strength*. With

the clear-mindedness of great statesmecha, great *leaders*. That is your *part to play*. Your divine role, burdened with the destiny of our world."

Oh please, thought Megatron. *They've made such a hash of it as it is. You seriously think Primus, if He exists, if He is actually all powerful, is that fragged stupid?*

"For those others of you," said Ecclesiastimus, "rejoice! You too have your god given path. Which brings me to my central point, the one thing, dear gentlemecha, you must keep close to your sparks above all else; *obedience*."

Megatron blinked.

"The nobility, the leaders, we are obedient to Primus, and so as we are obedient to Primus we may expect obedience in return. Consorts, your duty is obedience to your mate. Servants, to your masters. The Enforcer obeys his superior, the officer his general."

His optics settled on Megatron. "The miner, his supervisor."

"Oh that's it," said Ratchet, and there was a rapid shift of metal and a thump. Megatron risked a glance back and found Prowl with a leg over Ratchet's lap, quite literally holding him in place. By Ratchet's expression, Prowl was going to pay for that; jaw clenched, optics blazing, Megatron half expected to hear a dire threat.

So did Prowl, who was looking grimly dedicated to his duty, even if said duty involved being savaged by a medic.

"Your form dictates your function. Your divine role. Your altmode makes you good at something our society desperately needs, and would Primus design you without that in mind? He would not. Your brain and your t-cog—they're *connected*. If you were sparked a dockworker, a dockworker you should remain, for that is how God made you, and he gave you a mind to go with that body. He gave you the requisite will, the requisite *obedience*."

Megatron straightened his shoulders with an effort of will, forcing his face still. Someone would be watching, would probably be taking pictures. He had to look totally unaffected.

"To defy this, your place in the world, the orders of your superiors, is to defy Primus Himself. No matter your rank." Ecclesiastimus's optics settled on Megatron.

Megatron couldn't help it. He tilted his helm and gave the priest a slow smile, a hint of fang.

It only incensed the mech. "If mecha ignored this, if mecha went off pursuing their own dreams, our society would fall apart." He punctuated each word with a thump of fist on podium. "We would all like to be medics, I'm sure! But that's not how the world works. Tell me, would you really trust someone sparked a miner to treat your injuries? Of course not! Primus built his body strong and his mind loyal; what he didn't build was the processor to be a medic, the processor to direct those big clumsy fingers in surgery. He could crush your fuel pump between forefinger and thumb and he *would*, no matter how hard he tried not to, because Primus didn't mean him to do that job. Would you trust a Consort as a warrior? Primus made him delicate and gentle and pleasing to look upon. Would he know what to do with a gun in his hands? No! A proper consort would throw it down in disgust; one so mad and deluded as to try to use it would be incompetent. His delicate fingers would give out on the trigger; the sight of death a warrior is built to handle would traumatize him past recovery. Who would do something so cruel to such a beautiful being?" He was staring at Mirage as he said this and Mirage sat there stunned and staring back, optics very

wide.

He'd probably grown up listening to this drivel. Megatron was glad to see Jazz put out a bracing hand.

For himself, he'd heard everything the mech was saying about miners and medics and then some. It didn't really register anymore. He could, however, feel Ratchet's rage bubbling at his back.

"That's why we've never had mecha with tank treads as medics," said Ecclesiastimus, sounding satisfied. "It's impossible. To defy your function..." His gaze went to Megatron, then a little past him, and Megatron realized with horror his attention was on Ratchet now, "it's like leaving your conjunx endura without a word. You are breaking a *sacred contract*."

Ratchet looked briefly stricken and then glared. Megatron decided that, should he be in such a position, he'd push Ecclesiastimus into a smelter just for that.

Ecclesiastimus's tone changed, condescending, wheedling. "But we all make mistakes. We all make *errors*. Therein lies the greatness of God. He will forgive anything. Come forward with sincere repentance in your spark and you will be forgiven. You will find your feet upon the right path once more, and your processor, your frame, your spark, they will all be at ease and you will find joy."

"Yes, joy in working into deactivation," muttered Megatron to Rung, who gave him a touch of a very grim smile.

"But these are strange times," said Ecclesiastimus. He looked at Megatron again, and the entire congregation looked, too. Megatron stared down his nose at them.

"We have a Prime who was a miner. This would be unthinkable, but we are in terrible times. The Decepticon rebels who overturned our stable society are looking at us, next. They can't bear civilization, and must destroy it at each and every turn, like an envious newspark overturning his sibling's bowl of treats. Now, more than ever, we need those virtues a miner embodies."

Megatron blinked, wondering what the frag those were. The traits a miner embodied, in his experience, were usually exhaustion and expendability; insults tended to accuse them of being the personifications of raucous mess.

"Loyalty," said Ecclesiastimus, smugly. "Obedience. Simplicity. Gentleness. The reliance on every other mech around him, because the strength of the miner is the strength of the group."

Where had he learned that? That was one of the only things Megatron had missed about being a miner—the camaraderie.

And he was well aware he'd just been called stupid to his faceplate and was expected to take it as a compliment.

"An unassuming nature brings you closer to Primus. There is no one more humble than a miner. No one more uncomplicated. For us to succeed, for us to drive back this wave of arrogance and cruelty that threatens to break upon us, to ruin our way of life, we need a mech who embodies these virtues. The Prime is Primus's conduit to us. His instrument in our world, acting only on Primus's orders, his only desires Primus's desires, his only actions those Primus approves of, requires. Megatron Prime, would you please rise and join me?"

"Oh frag," whispered Mirage and then clamped a hand over his mouth, but there was

nothing for it. Megatron couldn't refuse without making a scene.

He rose and walked up to the front of the church, glad he didn't feel particularly unsettled by being the center of attention. As he should have, being apparently the embodiment of humility and compliance.

Ecclesiastimus smiled down at him, something that was clearly carefully not condescending on its surface but immediately became so when he opened his intake again. "My child, you have wandered a long time in the dark. Have you ever been inducted into the light?"

Megatron stared suspiciously at him. He was pretty sure this was what Mirage had warned him about—not to let it slip he'd not attended services like this before. He could say yes, and be exposed as a liar; no and invoke whatever Mirage so apparently feared, or simply take refuge in offense.

He'd spent the last few days being primped and polished within an inch of his function and pretending to be a passive mech far out of his depth. There was something rebellious that badly wanted an airing. So he stared, narrow-opticked, back and said in a voice intended to carry throughout the room, "And what, exactly, do you mean by that? I doubt this church, this religious body, august as it is, has a monopoly on *light*."

In the silence that followed, Megatron heard several people snicker. One was definitely Rung. He also heard someone, probably Jazz, groan.

"Flippancy ill becomes you, child," said Ecclesiastimus. "I know this is all new to you, and that your spark is frightened for the burden Primus has placed upon your shoulders. Remember to bear it with dignity, rather than the jests of a newspark."

Megatron only barely managed to avoid baring his dentae in threat. The condescension made rage boil under his spark. The burden was anything but new. What did he have to fear from these mecha, or from Primus, after what Trepan and Soundwave had done to him? After that battle, after the Functionists, after Jazz nearly bleeding out under his hands, after that decision to kill the Decepticon who'd killed a miner, after *Overlord*? Primus or no Primus, he had a people to serve, and he sincerely doubted any religious ceremony was going to better his ability to do that, still less one that came from this priest.

This mech's faith was all words. Megatron saw little point in such a thing. If one was to have faith, at least express it in action, in real, concrete changes to an unjust world. Not this meaningless charade, intended only to keep the weak in their place and the strong smug in authority.

Ecclesiastimus continued his lecture, peering down over the podium at Megatron and Megatron stood where he was with his face kept carefully still.

A thought occurred to Megatron; while he had only ever felt the Matrix's presence around his spark, rather than that of Primus, if what this priest was preaching was true, he was supposed to have a direct conduit to Primus. The very fact Ecclesiastimus was lecturing him in the first place put the lie to everything he was saying about Megatron being an instrument of Primus—or it was enormously presumptuous. He wondered how it was playing with the rest of the audience.

Then again, to them, he was only a miner. The lecture could be intended to comfort him. To make him secure in his true place in the world. If he were the person Ecclesiastimus was claiming he was.

But the message here was clear; the church Ecclesiastimus stood for was the primary authority in the world, above even that of the Prime. This whole exercise was to reinforce that power.

Anger bubbled slow in Megatron's spark, and he was fairly sure some of it was the Matrix. This was what was most important to them? Using faith to control? What they said the duties of a Prime were was *nothing* like the reality of it.

Ecclesiastimus had stepped around the podium. "Megatron of Tarn, Primus has selected you in our darkest hour. Come with me. Let your faith ease this difficult path. Let us show you the way to Primus, so you may walk in His light and with His blessing, and let your faith lift some of this heavy burden from your shoulders and bless you for the sacrifices you will be called to make." He made to urge Megatron up the steps to the feet of the massive gilded statue of Primus. Megatron went.

He wondered if any of the artisans who'd created this chapel had died in the process, fallen from the roof or crushed under beams or stone or metal blocks. The glimmer of silver and gold and iridescent paints reminded him of the mines; every one of those rare materials would have had to be mined by mecha like him. He wondered how many were toxic during the process of refinement. How many mecha died with choked vents, or lived with a constant hitching drag in their systems. So much expense. So much agony. So rich mecha could sit here and tell each other how much Primus loved them, living in proud ignorance of their own sins.

He'd never been a mech much inclined to faith, only the vicious pleas of the desperate. But right now, a determination was coming to him; that faith was worth little unless you backed it with the labor of your own servos. That if there was an all-powerful Primus watching them, Ratchet, sitting there next to Rung, was a frag of a lot closer to Him than Ecclesiastimus. Ratchet acted with compassion and did not turn his back on wrongs, Ecclesiastimus used religion to keep people silent about those wrongs.

Ecclesiastimus gestured for him to kneel. Megatron balked, looked over his shoulder at Jazz and Prowl. Both made enthusiastic and varyingly rude gestures to indicate he'd better damn well kneel, so he did, staring at the gilded pedes of the statue. Ecclesiastimus was droning on again, asking Primus to bless and guide Megatron and to keep him humble and obedient to Primus's will. He was gesturing grandly as he moved into begging forgiveness for Megatron's sins, many as they certainly were, and asking that he be cleansed so he could better do Primus's will among mortal mecha. He stretched one hand up to the ceiling and put the other on the back of Megatron's helm.

Shadowplay! That's what this is, an excuse for shadowplay! Alarm spiked through Megatron's systems; panic swamped him and he reacted without thinking, writhing free and *snapping* at the threat.

"He bit the priest," said Mirage, blankly. "He *bit* the priest. He bit the *priest*."

The congregation was stunned silent, all optics fixed on Ecclesiastimus yanking his hand away from Megatron with a shriek and minus a finger; those warframe-grade dentae were no joke. Megatron, for his part, looked both panicked and stunned.

"Can you excommunicate the Prime?" Jazz asked. "Asking for a friend."

"Ecclesiastimus looks like he's wondering the same thing," said Prowl. Ratchet was already up and headed toward the carnage.

Jazz turned to Mirage. "Mir, how fragged are we?"

Mirage was staring blank and stiff at the chaos at the front of the church. "Completely," he said. "Completely and utterly."

Yeah, that seemed about right. Jazz took a little comfort in, going by the completely dumbfounded expression on Mirage's creator's face, Phantasm had expected that about as much as anyone else here had.

Chapter 78

Megatron spat the finger from his mouth and then spat again, trying to clear it of the taste of living energon. The terror still flooded around him, voices coming to him in a garble, and he curled over, covering the back of his neck and head with both hands.

He knew he wasn't in the chair with Soundwave over him, kneeling with Trepan's needles in his brain, but the terror didn't abate, his systems wouldn't cycle down, and when a hand touched his shoulder he jerked away with a snarl until he heard Ratchet's voice, clear and hard. "Megatron. Vent. Count your vents."

He did, and after a handful of breaths Ratchet's voice again, some distance away. "Tell me the procedure for a minor reattachment."

That was all but engraved on the insides of his optic covers. Megatron obeyed, because obeying Ratchet's teaching voice was second nature to him now, and as he recited the fear ebbed. He could take his hands down off the back off the back of his neck. Ratchet, a little distance away, was lecturing.

"And that's why you don't fragging touch mecha without warning," he was saying. "If you'd cleared it with his staff first, they could have told you it was a bad idea. Something you're going to have to adapt to, Ecclesiastimus; a lot of what you'd call the lower classes have had very bad encounters with mnemosurgeons. Now, I've blocked the neural inputs to your hand. Can you feel that? Good. Looks like I can just reattach it. You're *very* lucky the Prime's dentae are so sharp."

"The Prime?!" said Ecclesiastimus. "The Prime? That's not a Prime—it's *feral*. *Dangerous!* Barely sentient!"

Ratchet just stared at him a few seconds, then leaned forward. "Let me give you a little free advice," he said coldly. "Don't insult the friend of the mech reattaching your finger. You are not going to find a better surgeon in the whole city, and I know that because Pharma isn't here. Regardless of what you condemn either of us for, we know our worth and our skill. And we also know the extent of your foolishness. Hold still and shut up, or you can take your finger away in a bag."

Ecclesiastimus seemed to suffer an attack of self-preservation. He shut up and let Ratchet finish repairing him. Once Ratchet was done, the Autobots left the chapel in a small, dejected group.

In Kaon, Starscream finished watching the feed, torn between being stunned at how well that had gone, and a little alarmed at its effectiveness. He looked up at Soundwave, who seemed two whiskers off radiating smugness.

"Well," he said. Silence. "That. That worked."

"Priest: easily bribed. Dislikes Megatron. Starscream's information: invaluable. Megatron's reaction: more beneficial than ever imagined."

"Laserbeak's hiding place: impeccable." Starscream meant it as a snide comment but didn't really put his spark into it. It came out complimentary, and Soundwave inclined his helm. "Megatron *is* terrified of shadowplay. Still."

Soundwave nodded. "A useful fact."

Ratchet got Megatron settled, which in this case was handing him over to Ironhide and telling them to beat the slag out of each other. He was pretty sure that would put paid to any further moping, though he privately warned Ironhide to stay the frag away from the back of the kid's head.

Ironhide snorted. "Do I look stupid to you?"

Someone had their head screwed on right. Ratchet went to find the rest of them.

"First of all," he announced, shoving his way into Prowl and Jazz's quarters, which had turned into an impromptu warroom, "No one gets to give him slag about that."

"But Ratchet," said some dumbaft, and Ratchet whirled on them, finding it to be Mirage.

"*NO*," he said. "No. You don't. Get. To. Give. Him. Slag." He braced his hands on the table and glared everyone else into silence.

Once they were all suitably cowed, he spoke again. "How many of you know how he became a medic?"

"He was a miner, wasn't he?" said Mirage. "It always seemed strange. I thought the Functionists were very against that sort of thing."

Prowl and Jazz glanced at one another. "We heard rumors," said Prowl. "Not much substantial. They weren't good."

Dominus and Minimus traded a glance and were silent. Rewind looked at his pedes. Rung, who didn't really belong in high level staff meetings but probably did belong in this one, steepled his fingers and looked clinically interested.

Ratchet leaned forward. "I didn't see him when they first brought him to the Iaconian Medical Academy, but from his scores he was hanging on by the tips of his claws by the second term, when I took him on as a student. And once I got a look at his brain under a blacklight, I found out how."

He straightened up, lecturing now. "When you reassign someone to a drastically different occupation, it's often actually worthwhile to do some quantity of mnemosurgery to optimize information retrieval and ease of future uploads. So I'd expected to see some evidence and scarring on his brain, but not what I actually saw. His processor looked like a fragging nebula. It wasn't the simple optimization procedure I'd expected—making his hands more sensitive, optimizing the vocabulary and pattern recognition parts of his brain, that sort of thing. No. The performing surgeon had ripped apart his processor. He'd gotten into his personality matrix, destroyed his ability to question authority, damaged even his ability to get angry, introduced several different varieties of what we call learning disabilities, the most drastic of which was an outright processor skip, and overall taken a bright, defiant young mech and turned him into an anxious disaster who

could barely write—pretty damn aware the whole time that he was missing *something*. Medical training wasn't intended to be an opportunity for Megatron. It was intended to be torture."

He looked to Dominus, who wasn't looking at him. "The mech responsible for the operation was Trepan. He moved in pretty lofty circles here. Doubtless you know of him."

"I did," said Dominus, and Rung also nodded.

"He tended to work with one of my rivals," he explained, when Ratchet's attention turned to him.

"Despite what Trepan did to him, he managed to get through the academic portion of his degree and become a full apprentice. That's when he got the Matrix. The rest you know." Ratchet looked down at his hands, then back at all of them. "What that religious idiot did today dredged all that trauma up, compounded by what Soundwave did to him less than a week ago. So if any of you scold him for his reaction, your next fuel system checks will be *memorable*. And it goes without saying: keep your grubby hands the frag away from the back of his head. Got it?"

"Understood," they all chorused, like a scolded class.

"Good," said Ratchet. "I'm going to go get him some foamed energon puffs, with and without mercury filling. All of you, cool your jets and take it gentle with him today. He can fragging well learn how to navigate this whole mad society, he's done even harder things with even less of his processor functional, but just. For one day. Ease up, would you?"

And he stalked back out.

Jazz and Prowl watched Ratchet leave. "Well," said Jazz. "Party's over folks, time to go home. Any suggestions on how to unfrag this clusterfrag before this afternoon's party are welcome."

They went, grumbling the while. Jazz watched them go, closed and locked the door, and turned to Prowl.

"Iacon has security records," he said. "Including mnemosurgery records. This isn't the first time we've been surprised by Megatron's instinctive reactions. It needs to be the last."

Prowl eyed him. He didn't need to say anything like, "so you're planning to break into those records and find Megatron's file" because yes, of course Jazz intended to do exactly that. He didn't bother saying anything disapproving, either, because Jazz would have a counter to it, because he knew fragged well Prowl wouldn't approve. What he said was, "What other strategic value will this have?"

"We'll have the access records," said Jazz. "That puffed up priestling had us entirely too dead to rights for my liking. Which means he's either working with the 'cons, and Starscream passed a bit of information along, or that someone's been doing their research—or was involved in Megatron's shadowplay in the first place."

"Very well," said Prowl.

"I'll be careful," said Jazz, in response to the unspoken concern. He grinned at Prowl, jauntily. "I'll go now. We'll be busy tonight."

"We should do a brawl," Rodimus declared. "Two teams and just fight. Get all that nervous energy out, you know?"

To Megatron's surprise, Ironhide nodded. "Yeah, you lot aren't going to learn enough just from fighting one on one. Usual rules. Don't make us send anyone to the medbay. Or make Megatron here stop to fix your stupid aft up. He's not gonna appreciate it."

The response to this was groans and optic rolling, but general agreement. There was a general movement toward Megatron, as if most of the mecha there wanted to be on his side, but Ironhide grabbed Rodimus by the spoiler and dragged him to the other side of the room. The teams assorted themselves more evenly after that.

It really did help. Megatron found a huge relief in the violence, bowling yelping Autobots here and there and getting piled on by Bumblebee, Cliffjumper, and Bluestreak all at once trying to pin him. Cliffjumper had the bad judgement to try and bite but Megatron made eye contact, bared his own dentae, and growled and Cliffjumper thought better of it. He also dissolved into helpless giggles as a result and Megatron plucked him off and tossed him at Ironhide, who would have presented a real problem, just before Bumblebee wrapped his arms around Megatron's torso and kicked him hard in the interface paneling. Megatron just tilted forward as if he were going to fall over. Bumblebee scrambled out of the way and Megatron helped him along with a firm, carefully judged kick.

Bluestreak was bigger, clinging to his back, and not as easily dislodged. Megatron ended up headbutting him and elbowing him hard in the lateral vents and then backing up hard against a wall. Bluestreak went *oof* and Megatron dug a claw into the metal between forefinger and thumb and Bluestreak gave up and fell off him, just in time for Ironhide to charge and strike Megatron in the abdomen.

He went down with a gasp, Ironhide on top of him. There was a touch of panic that rose, instinctive, but Ironhide had been teaching him how to push past it and he got a knee up between them and shoved, tearing Ironhide free as well. He rolled back to his pedes and spun to backhand Sunstreaker in the jaw, prompting an "Ow. Good one."

Bumblebee tripped him by the simple expedient of tackling him around the ankle. Megatron went down again, caught himself, and was promptly flattened by someone heavy (probably Ironhide) diving onto his back. He started to roll, and an arm tightened around his neck. "Gotcha."

He turned his chin into the crook of Ironhide's elbow and tucked it in firmly, reaching up to bend one of Ironhide's digits the wrong way. Ironhide released him. He struggled upright again and in the sudden lull in the chaos, the sound of applause stopped everyone dead.

It shouldn't have been possible to make the act of clapping sound sarcastic, but the tall pink mech standing at the other end of the room managed it. Megatron frowned at them; totally unfamiliar, a rounded white helm, decorative paint around their lips, and totally unamused, cold blue optics focused on him.

"The only reason," the mech said, "I'm amused instead of just *depressed* is that you are supposed to be a lot of civilians. You've got what, two people who know what they're doing," they gestured to Ironhide and Impactor, and then fluttered a hand vaguely at Sunstreaker and Sideswipe, who bristled and showed their fangs, "but a few of you are only used to fighting to play for a crowd and the rest of you are just... enthusiastic amateurs."

Behind the newcomer, Hound skidded to a halt. He panted briefly and then said, "So um, this is Arcee? And she's a *she*. And um. Apparently also an expert in combat? She was very insistent on coming to see all of you."

Megatron blinked a little at the pronouns. He hadn't heard another Cybertronian use them before. He'd heard *of* mecha using them in the distant past; Terminus had remembered a time before the Functionists had cracked down on such things, but Megatron himself had simply been too young. He didn't know if she was of Terminus's generation or older, but to have survived even a short period under the Functionists in such open defiance...

He disentangled himself and approached her with a hand outstretched. "Arcee, it is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Megatron."

Behind him, Impactor muffled an exclamation of "*Megatron Prime!*" in a cough.

"You're the Prime," said Arcee, looking him over, obviously unimpressed with what she saw. "So it chose a big, foolish bruiser this time. I shouldn't even be surprised."

"Excuse you," said Impactor, in such a way it was anything but polite.

Megatron held up a hand to quiet him. He'd had enough words like that thrown at him in the academy that it didn't really register, but he *was* curious about why Arcee would choose to start with insults. "I'm sure it seems that way," he said mildly.

The evaluating look he got in return showed beyond a shadow of a doubt he was being tested. He wasn't sure he'd passed.

"Well," she said at last. "Let's see what there is to you." And she drew two swords.

There was a hiss of vents from the Autobots all around him and a general movement forward, but now Megatron was reasonably certain that this, too, was a test. "It's all right," he said aloud, to Ironhide's dismissive snort. "Give me my axe."

Ironhide did. "If you hurt him," he said to Arcee, letting the end of the sentence dangle.

"We're sparring," she said. "What do you expect? Can your precious leader not handle a few dents?"

Impactor growled. "If you *seriously* hurt him..."

"Settle down," Megatron told both of them, and then brought his axe into a middle guard, gave Arcee a short sharp nod.

He was hopelessly outclassed. The few blows he got past her guard, he was pretty sure she'd *let* him, Primus knew why. The rest of the time, he had no time to think, only react, and he *knew* the Matrix was interfering, because *of course* it was. He was moving too fast to let himself have the usual sort of 'doubletake' he needed to ensure he wasn't letting it control him, and partway through he was so fragged overwhelmed by it that he let the Matrix direct his limbs, and as a result, Arcee kicked his aft even more thoroughly.

She scored what would have been killing blows if she hadn't been pulling her punches severely at least eight times before she stepped back. "Idiot," she said. "You're letting it control you. Stop that. Wall it off."

"It's around my spark," he pointed out, not nearly as politely as he should have, but after that day he was well past polite. "How the frag am I supposed to do that?"

She lowered her swords. "You don't even know how to separate it from yourself?"

That aggravated him. "It's not as if it came with an instruction manual."

"You have to push back. You can't let it just direct you." Her optics narrowed and she closed the distance between them, seizing his offhand. "Primus," she said, examining his claws. "It did that, didn't it. Fragging thing."

She turned away, talking as if she were lecturing a single student, as if the room weren't filled with Autobots. "You're going to have to learn to control that," she stabbed a finger at his chest, "and I mean *control* it, before you can fight competently. As soon as you switched to reacting, to letting the kinetic memory of your circuits guide you, it took over. You can't let it do that. It'll get you *dead*. Because I'm pretty sure you figured out, it's not a nice thing. It does not have your best interests in mind."

"I noticed," said Megatron dryly.

"Then learn to do something about it," said Arcee, and went back to beating him soundly in front of the rest of the Autobots.

As she made a total fool of him, Megatron realized he admired her. She was one of the first newcomers who wasn't overawed by him or his titles or what he was supposed to be; the depths of her unimpressedness were almost encouraging and familiar, except this time he could earn some degree of approval through learning. Almost like Ratchet, he realized, except Ratchet had always been almost unnecessarily gentle around him. Ratchet, after all, had only known him when he was badly compromised, hurt and tired and unsure of his very self. Arcee had no reason for such gentleness, and exercised still less and it was a relief.

"I've trained worse," she declared after she'd 'killed' Megatron another dozen times. She turned to address Ironhide, as if Megatron weren't standing right there. "He's completely fragging clueless and relies on that bauble too much. But he's a quick study and not an arrogant skidplate. We might make something of him." She smiled, slow and vicious, and Megatron suspected he would not enjoy that process at all. The smile was particularly threatening for the pink detailing of her intake, the color of fresh energon. The effect was such that Megatron immediately decided to try that kind of detailing for himself. Not energon pink—he knew that wouldn't work on someone with his paintjob, of which he was too fond of to change—but maybe something darker, subtler. He, too, wanted his enemies to see that he was smiling, to master that silent threat.

"We," grumbled Ironhide. "You're presuming a lot. And a quick study is putting it mildly. He's got the right aptitude."

"He's going to get an inflated processor with you telling him things like that," said Arcee. "The Prime business is bad enough. Probably should be glad he hasn't let it turn him into the sort of pompous aft it usually does."

"Most of my experience of being Prime has been people trying to offline me for it," said Megatron, keeping his voice mild. "The Functionists wanted to use me and the Decepticons to kill

me. I can't say it's been an experience that's particularly lent itself to pompousness."

"Yeah and now the nobles want to marry you off to one of them and support their priests," said Arcee, and snickered. "Heard you bit that old gasket Ecclesiastimus. I supposed I could put up with you, if you'd done that."

She turned to face him. "I heard you were here to turn this whole rotten system upside down. I'm here to help."

"Thank you," said Megatron. "That's exactly what I intend to do."

Jazz returned within a few hours; it had been easy enough to slip in using a falsified pass and a new paintjob, and he came back bearing a dataslip he'd copied all the files to. "Haven't looked at them yet," he told Prowl. "No time. But first, let's have a private look-see, because I bet this is stuff Megatron won't want people to know is out there about him. It's probably records of the worst day of his function, given what Ratchet told us."

The worst day of his function. Prowl had seen Megatron returning to the Autobots after what Soundwave had done to him, and privately shuddered. The worst day of Megatron's function, it seemed, had a lot of competition.

But Jazz was right, because Trepan had documented every last step of the process of tearing Megatron's mind to shreds. There was even video, Trepan narrating calmly, his visual feed fixed on Megatron's helpless brain. Only one optic and optic ridge were visible, but they alone told an eloquent story of pain and fear. Worse still were the noises. Worst of all was how Trepan seemed to treat this as a normal exercise, perfectly businesslike.

Jazz had only picked up what was floating around the intelligence community about common shadowplay techniques, but it was enough to realize this was far past the standard prescribed shadowplay. And even though conscious brains were supposed to be more receptive to change, that was for tweaking opinion, intelligence. Not a full reformat like this. Not twisting both Megatron's processing and memory, the very way they worked, and his personality, rerouting deep and powerful parts of him into something frightened and compliant. He should have been unconscious for that. Mecha could offline from that kind of trauma.

"We should get Ratchet," said Prowl, sounding ill.

"Yeah," said Jazz. Even though it meant they'd probably have to watch this again.

He wanted to *kill* Optimus. Trepan was, by all reports, already dead, and Jazz wanted to bring him back just to kill him again. But that was a more distant desire than to get his hands around Optimus's treacherous neck and *squeeze*. Optimus had had something of an idea of what had happened to Megatron, had met Megatron while he was still recovering from this violation, must have realized how profoundly it had hurt him seeing the difference before and after the Matrix had intervened.

And he'd ordered Soundwave to open Megatron's processor anyway. To do it in front of him and in front of Starscream. They'd *watched* Megatron fight and plead and they'd still done it—why? Because Megatron's pain didn't matter? Because *Autobot* pain didn't matter? Because it was too convenient an opportunity to pass up? Fragging pit, Megatron had trusted Optimus enough to

'face him. And Optimus had still watched him screaming, begging not to have the worst violation ever perpetrated on him repeated, completely unmoved. Had scolded him for resisting, had *blamed* him for that.

Megatron's trust wasn't easily come by. If Jazz—and Prowl, too, by necessity—ever gained that trust, he would never abuse it like that. It was totally, utterly, unthinkable. Cruel, too. It was like Optimus had decided that his access to Megatron's frame meant access to everything Megatron was.

Jazz wanted to offline Soundwave, too, but because of this, Optimus was top of the list.

"Jazz," said Prowl gently. Jazz flinched.

"Yeah?" he managed, vocalizer fizzing static.

"You just cycled up your battle protocols." Prowl was looking at him, cool but understanding.

Understanding of what? That there was a reason he was following this mech, this intemperate, impulsive, impractically idealistic and totally untrained mech with a temper to match Ratchet's and an ironclad belief in the righteousness of his cause—a profoundly dangerous combination? Or...

And it hit Jazz like a runaway shuttle and he tood there a few moments, both horrified at the realization and the timing of it, because what sort of broken fragged up disaster realized they *loved* someone when they saw them in—in *agony*, their mind ripped apart? He remembered the great shadowy bulk of Megatron over him, working swift and sure within his broken chassis. Megatron with his back slagged half to scrap climbing out of the medical transport after his first battle, the repeated stories from the wounded. *He saved me, he saved me, he knelt there with the blasterfire splashing off his back and he saved me.* Megatron standing above them and giving that speech, starting the war, fresh out of that fragging chair with the energon and cleanser still stark on his face, frame riddled with the dents where he'd fought the straps so hard he'd injured his own plating.

Megatron quietly marveling over the energon puffs.

He was staring at Prowl still, but at least the shock had cycled his battle protocols back down. He gulped.

"It's hard to watch, is all," he managed. He was pretty sure this wasn't the time to bring it up. *Hey Prowler, I think I know who I'd like us to trine with... yeah it's the same mech who bit someone's finger off three hours ago. Yep, the same one who outright murdered that Decepticon. And drank poison. On purpose. And I know that all those things make you suspicious as frag but honestly I think they're kind of hot.*

Yeah. That would go down like an unpowered shuttle.

"You don't have to watch it again," said Prowl, still gentle. "I can brief you afterwards."

He should stay. He really should stay. Jazz looked at Prowl helplessly.

"Go on," said Prowl. "You should make sure that they've finished training in time to get all the dents out for this afternoon. Go find Mirage."

And that was pretty much an order. Jazz bobbed his helm in a nod, glanced once more at

the horrible frozen image on the screen, and fled the room.

He found everyone sitting on the floor of the training room, sharing enough foamed energon puffs to feed an army. "You just missed Ratchet," said Rodimus cheerfully, licking his digits clean. "At least you didn't miss the fuel."

Megatron was deep in conversation with one of the newcomers. Jazz checked the database—Arcee—and committed the pronouns to memory before sitting down next to them and snagging a puff.

"What you need to do when it does that is focus on what you can feel. What *you* can feel, not what it's feeding into your sensor suite. It can be sudden, but grounding yourself is vital to only experience the vision at a remove, rather than living it."

Megatron frowned. "It's made that...difficult."

"It does. But if you don't ground yourself, it will drive you mad." There was absolute certainty in Arcee's voice, as if she'd seen it happen. "Experiencing death after death through the optics of the dying as if it really is your own frame? It's not good for you."

"And how do you know that?" asked Jazz, cheerfully enough, stealing an energon puff right out from under Arcee's fingers and grinning at her. It wasn't quite a threat.

Arcee smiled back, and that *was* a threat. "I spent a few years killing someone over and over in a regeneration field. It wasn't good for him."

"Makes sense," said Jazz. It didn't. How did she know what sort of visions the Matrix gave? She was correct about them too, by Megatron's expression.

He finished his energon puff just as Mirage walked in, tossed the other intelligence 'bot one, and set about licking his own fingers clean. A guilty part of him hoped Megatron was paying attention, though this really wasn't the time for seduction. Definitely not without talking to Prowl first. "Sorry kids," he said when he was done, "but playtime's over. We gotta get ready for the next event."

Megatron tensed up at that, and Jazz felt even guiltier.

Arcee thumped Megatron in the shoulder, companionably. "Just remember, if anyone's a real aft to you, you can just bite them again. Or smile broadly. Should shut them up. These noblemecha are all cowards." She glanced at Mirage. "You excepted."

And with that, she left.

Megatron heaved a heavy vent. "Time to get repainted?" he asked Jazz, a little resigned.

"Yep," said Jazz, firmly quashing the sympathy that rose in his spark. "It is."

Well. That had been. Horrible.

And informative.

Ratchet sat back and looked at Prowl. "Where's Jazz?"

"Gone," said Prowl. "For now. He didn't want to watch it again."

Ratchet arched an optic ridge. Prowl arched one back.

"According to my last systems scan, he's not got any of these injuries anymore," he said. "I'm fairly sure the Matrix fixed them."

"That's good," said Prowl. "But the trauma..."

"We'll see if we can get him to talk to Rung a bit more," said Ratchet. "That'll have to happen naturally; if we book him an official appointment, I'm pretty sure he'll just sit there and glare the whole time."

Prowl snorted. "If it keeps him from biting any more officials..."

"That slaghead deserved it," snapped Ratchet.

"Yes, he did," said Prowl, "but we're going to have a lot of trouble as a result. I'd prefer to avoid a repetition. Biting people who are apts is not in fact a sustainable political strategy, as much as I, too, would like to engage in it, and as much as I recognize Megatron did it because he felt genuinely threatened. We need Iacon: Praxus will not support us without Iacon's agreement, and Polyhex, though already likely to ally with us, does not have the strength to serve as the nexus of an alliance—even with their close relationship with Nyon. Tyger Pax is deeply religious; the proof we can come to an agreement with Iacon will be instrumental in whether they agree to join a movement already far too radical for their tastes. Iacon is the lynchpin of the success of the Autobot movement; it is centrally located, with easily defended supply lines and robust infrastructure for its own defense that will be easily expanded to accommodate refugees, as well as the military infrastructure to support a far larger army than we currently have. Politically, its situation as the capitol of the last several millennia means it commands an intricate web of alliances and treaties that tie this entire region together and have served as the basis for trade with every other part of Cybertron—and many of its satellites and colonies. A legitimate government *must* be seated in Iacon. We'd easily win over Polyhex, certainly—but there would be little enough support elsewhere, and Optimus and his thugs would crush us within weeks before moving on. If he were smart, he'd offer to get rid of us as a favor to Iacon to establish a treaty. They'd probably agree." He huffed a sigh. "I understand Megatron's reasons for doing what he did—for everything he's done. But if this doesn't work, if we lose Iacon, our next best option is getting the frag off the planet. And I'm still working on how to make that anything but a disaster. And from a strategic viewpoint, from the viewpoint of the survival of the Autobot Cause, no single mech's life or comfort is worth Iacon."

"Fine," said Ratchet, raising his hands. "Fine. Consider me lectured."

After Mirage and Sunstreaker had finished polishing Megatron within an inch of his function, Megatron waved them away. "I'd like to speak with Ratchet, privately," he said. They went. Ratchet came closer and put a hand on Megatron's shoulder.

"What's eating you, kid?" he asked. Megatron had been unusual somber after training. Was that just because of the incident with that completely unbearable priest?

Megatron reached up to pat his hand, looking at their reflection in the mirror. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine. Never better." Oh, Ratchet supposed he might have had difficulty recharging, as he had all those nights in the Decepticon base after... But he was safe here. More importantly, Megatron's whirlwind arrival on Iacon's social scene had kept him *busy*.

Megatron shot him a Look. Then he sighed, his shoulders slumping. "What that priest said, about you and Pharma. It's been several months. We got preoccupied with other things after that initial incident, and I think we neglected you. It wasn't fair, and it wasn't right. How are you doing?"

"Nosey," Ratchet remarked, and was silent. He couldn't quite meet Megatron's optics in the mirror. "I...I was one of the people who got preoccupied with other things, too," he said. "Jazz almost dying and then all the flocks of lost Autobots you brought home and then that last incident. And all that's happened in the last few days. I suppose I haven't had time to think about it." He had had time to think about it, but that had only been very late into the night and nights like that he'd sat up staring blankly at the wall, or read overdue reports until the shaking stopped. It hadn't just been that one incident, but up until then he'd felt like he could put it behind him. Like he was safe and it didn't matter anymore. He'd spent a little time irrationally angry when he thought of it, avoiding Pharma, before that incident. But after it pushing the anger and fear aside and going to do something else had been easier by far.

He thumped Megatron's shoulder and tried a smile. "Just keep me busy. But not too busy!"

Then he saw Megatron's face, and he realized his smile and his affected cheerfulness hadn't fooled the younger mech at all. Megatron looked gravely, sadly back at him.

"Ratchet," he said. "You're not alone. You don't have to do this alone."

"I know," said Ratchet, the smile falling from his face. He didn't have to do this alone. But neither did he want to talk about it. To make it any more real than it had been. And he didn't want any of them looking at him with *pity*. Which they would if they knew. "Kid. I managed for two years with him, after they put you out of commission. One more incident isn't going to break me. Especially if I'm safe now."

I'm safe now, he reminded himself.

It sounded like a lie. Even within his own helm. But Megatron stopped pressing him for answers and instead gave him a small worried smile.

"Any time you need me, ask. I don't care if it's the middle of the night," he said, and left it there.

What about what they did to you, kid? Ratchet wanted to ask. But if he did, the conversation would continue. He didn't want that to happen.

"I will," he promised, lying, but Megatron gave him another small smile as if he believed him.

Thank Primus the garden party was a lot less formal than the evening one had been. He didn't have to wear the adornments he had earlier, which, though they were beautiful, meant his helm was fully covered. And after that morning, Megatron very much wanted his helm covered.

And the structure of the party was such that he didn't have to worry too much about table manners. There were drinks and small delicacies to be eaten as you walked, admiring the admittedly very fine crystals, but not much more, and none required implements other than one's hands. He was glad of that.

Still, he was very much on edge. He'd (as Jazz would put it) royally fragged up repeatedly in the last day. Even more so with the incident with the priest, which he was torn between regretting for its implications, and feeling immensely satisfied because the fragger had deserved it. He also hadn't *meant* to do it, which made it all the worse. If he'd deliberately bitten the mech, knowing the likely fallout, it would have been a great deal more satisfying.

As it was, he was mostly just embarrassed. And imagined he could still taste the processed energon and feel the priest's comparatively weak strut parting under his dentae. It wasn't a pleasant memory.

He managed well enough, being formally introduced to Tyrest once again, and privately wondered whether Tyrest was regretting his decision to teach him basic diplomacy and statecraft; he must, after all, have known about the priest-biting incident, which boded well for neither exercise. But none of it showed on his faceplate. He merely said, "I'll see you the day after tomorrow for our first session," and if he was looking down his nose at Megatron, it could well have been because he was simply a great deal taller.

The mech behind him, red white and blue and also winged, glared at Mirage and said nothing. Mirage shrank a little into Megatron's shadow until he had gone and then said, "Star Saber."

Megatron glanced back and down at him. Mirage added, "My intended."

Oh. Intended and angry to have been denied his partner. Megatron sent a stern frown after the other mech, but no one noticed.

Except for Mirage, who prodded him hard in the spinal strut. "Don't antagonize him! We're lucky enough he hasn't decided to hold you or Hound responsible for me leaving and demanded satisfaction."

That sounded... potentially incredibly perverted. Megatron looked down at Mirage in alarm. "What does that mean?" He was not about to support anyone providing that aft with a compensatory frag.

"A duel," said Mirage, obviously exasperated.

"Oh," said Megatron, relieved.

"What did you..." Mirage saw the expression on Megatron's face and reconsidered his question. "You know what, never mind."

"Everyone here seems obsessed enough with interface," Megatron muttered, and had the satisfaction of Mirage abruptly choking on thin air. Prowl, next to him, remained silent and Ironhide and Impactor managed to muffle their snickers.

"No. No. Not that. Primus." Mirage hastily composed himself. "You're going to kill me,

you fragger."

Megatron noted with amusement that Mirage seemed to be cursing a lot more after the last day or so. It was only fair, because *he* wanted to curse more, too.

They proceeded on. And as they rounded a corner, they found Phantasm waiting.

Phantasm was the last person Megatron wanted to see right now. Had the incident of the morning not happened, he would have been pleased to rub Phantasm's lack of success in the other mech's haughty face, but biting a priest seemed to have given Phantasm the advantage again.

"Good afternoon," he said, refusing to be intimidated.

"Good afternoon," said Phantasm. "I trust I see you well."

Megatron's tank, still unsettled, had him slanting his drink away from Phantasm before he really thought about it. Phantasm noticed.

"Don't worry. I will not attempt to poison you again," he said. He looked away. "We believed that the folktales of the divinity of Primes and their imperviousness to toxins were just that, but it seems there is truth to them."

"Indeed," said Megatron, a mech who had spent the better part of the night purging his tanks down his washracks drain. At least Phantasm was still uncomfortable about that as well.

"I can't help but notice your choice of aide," said Phantasm. Megatron hummed a noncommittal noise.

"I do hope he hasn't given you an incorrect idea of my household. He does have siblings—much better mecha by far. They're well educated, well mannered, and, of course, completely untouched."

"I fail to see why that last part would matter," said Megatron.

"They are not shareware," said Phantasm, viciously, with a glance at Mirage. Mirage, for his part, hunched his shoulders down—the insult had hit home. Megatron stopped walking and turned toward Phantasm.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear," he said coldly. "My mecha are free to bond to whom they will, and I will not tolerate any of them being referred to as shareware or, for that matter, any other derogatory term, for their choices. This includes Mirage, no matter your previous relationship. Indeed, that one insult just cost you any possibility of me entertaining a suit from your household."

That broke the thin veneer of civility. Phantasm's head came up, optics blazing with rage.

"You think you're a great deal more than you are, don't you," he said. "You're just as out of your depth as ever, Megatron. You don't know what you're doing, and it's going to destroy this planet. Someone needs to get a leash on you before that happens." He stepped forward, faceplate twisted. "Me? I'm the one here who wants this fragging planet to keep on turning. You just want to burn it all down, and for what? To prove some naive ideals about equality and justice? Are those *really* worth the deaths already on your shoulders? Really?"

"The only difference between the lives on my shoulders and the lives on yours is that I can see the ones on mine," said Megatron, refusing to be moved. "My people died by the thousands to

build your cities. And yet, there are no memorials. There was no one to notice them, to mourn them, than the people they worked alongside. You named us well—*disposables*—because you made certain that no one would ever notice our sacrifices. That must end, and whether it ends by law or in fire is up to you and yours, because while my reforms horrify you, I assure you that Optimus and Starscream's will be worse by far."

"No," said Phantasm. "It's you. Optimus and Starscream were your acolytes, and they turned on you. Currently they hold more military power than either of us, that is true. But *you* are the threat. You're the one inspiring mech after mech to defy the things that brought us a billion years of the most advanced civilization in the adjacent three galaxies. You're the one with the golden tongue, Megatron of Tarn. You're the idealist. The match to an energon stockpile. And I will do anything it takes to keep you from destroying everything we've built." He straightened. "You were forged in the 1st cycle 12 in Cold Construction Facility 113. A facility owned by Reflection Mining Corporation." He smiled poisonously. "My household's corporation."

Mirage drew a sharp hissing vent.

"I fail to see how this is relevant," said Megatron, as mildly as he could manage.

"Reflection Mining Corporation is still solvent," said Phantasm. "And you still have several million shainx of your construction debt to pay off."

"I see you checked," said Megatron. He did know exactly how much that debt was, eating all his pay save his rations since his earliest memories, a quantity inching down over his entire existence, a slow countdown to freedom. "But it was paid off when I was reformatted into a medic."

"They put it in abeyance," said Phantasm. "And withdrew that once you became Prime." He glanced sidelong at Mirage. "Your legal status is the same as his."

Megatron felt every plate of his frame clamp closer to his body. His mind raced, a frantic list of the rules he'd broken in just the last few days. He'd hardly thought about it, but they came up in his mind with crystal clarity; he'd memorized them long ago, because the punishments for violating them had been so severe. In the mines, Phantasm could have taken him apart bolt by bolt with a rusty wrench for what he'd done just today, even if he *hadn't* bitten Ecclesiastimus, and even his fellow miners would have found it justified.

His lips skinned back from his dentae. Overlord had tried to control him. Overlord had been a Point One Percenter. Phantasm was *nothing*.

"We will be checking the veracity of your claim," said Prowl at his side, cold. "It should go without saying that we'll all be unimpressed—and very likely to pursue damages—if you turn out to be lying or exaggerating."

Phantasm handed over a datapad. Gave Megatron an arch look. "Your construction documents. Copies."

Megatron tried not to look at them. They'd been promised to him when he'd finished paying his construction debt; they were what would have allowed him to move freely, rather than only within the company towns and territories he had been assigned to.

"You can cooperate quietly," Phantasm told Megatron. "Or I will invoke my rights as the holder of your construction debt. And the courts are unlikely to support you. To them, at least, there's no grounds to pretend you're anything but what you are: a miner, and a disobedient,

defective one at that. Think on it. Good evening."

He turned on a heel and stalked away.

Chapter 79

It was ridiculous to be scared. He was Prime, he had an army of Autobots at his back. He had allies and the whole planet knew his name; it wasn't just him and Terminus. He wasn't just something inconvenient that could be swept under the rug. No supervisor, not even Phantasm himself, would dare whip him bloody once more. There were no endless double shifts. No way they could inflict recharge depravation on him in punishment, or refuse medical care, or starve him, or drive a nail through his hand to pin him to whatever he was accused of stealing, or force him to burn his own writings. There were no guards waiting for an excuse to beat him. No leering aliens lining up to buy him by paying his construction debt and dragging him off to a life as their pet. No mnemosurgeon waiting in the wings. No caves he could be walled up and left in. No readily available smelting pits he could be thrown into, his screams a lesson for his peers. No hack ready to dismantle him alive and aware for parts.

But still the punishments rolled through his processor, things he'd seen for himself, stories he'd heard, the faint memory of standing in a line with an alien walking up and down and considering them, for one brief moment holding his chin in its clammy hard hand while it looked into his face and said *not my taste*, the supervisor who'd strung him up and flogged him raw for the datapad he'd found. The screams of a mech in a smelter until his voicebox melted but he'd still been alive and aware, his mouth opening and straining with nothing coming out.

And he was afraid. Paralyzed with it, sitting as the rest of his staff bustled around him trying to save him and there was nothing, nothing, he could do for himself. Dominus and Minimus were there, and Mirage was there and Jazz and Prowl and Ratchet, all working as hard as they could to find a way to break Phantasm's new hold on him and right now, even with the Matrix, even though he was supposed to be their infallible, calm leader, Megatron could do nothing but sit there with his documentation in hand and shake. The horrors of the mines washed up and over him. He ached with them, he trembled with them. He'd put them in his past and moved forward from them and here they came reaching up for him once again.

Disposable.

He had come here to his greatest enemies on the planet, in all the universe, and they'd done, somehow, the one thing that had seemed so unlikely as to be useless to be afraid of.

They had made him, once more, a disposable. A helpless body to be thrown around and used as they chose.

He had no legal experience. He had no idea how this world worked. So he sat quietly and watched his officers try to save him without hope or comprehension.

After a while, Mirage separated himself from the group and came to see him. "They're still working," he said quietly. "Dominus might have the funds to buy out your contract, but that requires Phantasm to be interested in selling it. He's not interested. There are a few other legal options they're experiencing, but Phantasm just sent his terms and I want to go over them with you. Is that all right?"

Numb, Megatron nodded.

"Part of his terms are that you will agree to be conjunxed to my sibling," said Mirage, reluctantly. "His name is Apparition; he would stand to inherit if my creator's heir, Specter, hadn't returned from his military service."

Megatron looked at his face, the thin unhappy line of his mouth. "You don't like him."

"He is not..." Mirage hesitated, clearly choosing his options. He looked away. "It will be difficult."

A silence and then he burst out, angry, as if he couldn't help himself, "He's not an honorable mech. He had a habit of pressuring the servants, both at home and at the university, and my creator saw no reason to rein him in. He's if anything *more* conservative than Phantasm, and your Primacy will matter far less to him than your construction. And with the situation with the debt, and the fact he isn't a consort—he's not going to act like the deferent partner. He'll be happy to play the part in public, maybe, but he'll be reporting to Phantasm the whole time and won't hesitate to annul the marriage if you don't obey him. Politically, definitely. And likely personally, as well."

Of course Phantasm would tolerate rape and abuse. Mirage saw Megatron's face and quickly added, "You won't be able to kill him. It'll annul the agreement and unlike a consort, he has rights. It would be considered murder, worse still because of your perceived status."

"We're not letting him get conjunxed to someone like that," said Ratchet firmly, from across the room. He met Megatron's optics. "He deserves better."

"We might not have a choice, if we're going to hold Iacon," said Prowl. "And we need Iacon to hold the planet."

"The reason I bring this up is that Phantasm wants you to meet Apparition. Tonight. It might stall him. Keep him from filing the necessary paperwork to reclaim you legally. Are you willing to do that?" Mirage looked up at him, hopefully. "We'll try to get you out of this, but can you stall him?"

"I'll rip him apart if he puts a hand near my panel," Megatron warned. "Or tried what Tracks's family did."

"That's permissible," said Mirage. "Fully permissible."

Megatron looked at Prowl, who shook his head a little. Apparently it wasn't fully permissible. He glanced at Mirage—and understood. Mirage was acting like this because he was watching Megatron go to the fate that had so terrified him he'd risked his family's displeasure and conjunxed himself to one of the gardeners. An unloving relationship, with a partner who would always treat him as lesser, and held terrifying power over him. A lifetime of doing the best he could and knowing it wasn't enough under watchful optics filled with cruelty and disdain. A lifetime of the same cruelties that Ratchet had endured, but walking into it full knowing rather than it creeping slowly upon him. No wonder Ratchet looked ready to commit murder.

Megatron closed his optics.

How far was he willing to go to keep his Autobots safe?

If Prowl said that cooperation was their best option, he was right. Megatron had seen the mech in action often enough to trust his judgement. If he said this was necessary to save the Autobot Cause, it was.

But at what price?

Despite his visceral disgust at the idea of intimacy with anyone who even faintly resembled Phantasm, with anybody who wasn't Terminus, it wasn't the thing that chilled him to the spark. It was the thought of the power Phantasm would wield over him. It was the thought of what the

Autobots would be corrupted into, because Megatron had no doubt whatsoever that Phantasm, given any dram of power over them, would change them to suit himself and his own corrupt cruelties.

Could he accept that? Could he accept being the instrument of it?

Megatron already knew his own answer but a treacherous part of his mind wondered if accepting Dominus's aid was so different. Instead of preparing for an invasion, he'd spent days being shined and polished and pampered and courted and sneered at. He'd spent days pretending to be something refined. Something willing to please. The pet that Apparition would make him.

He'd spent days pretending to be something he wasn't.

How much of that was Dominus hoping to find real? Was he hoping to spoil Megatron into corruption? Into becoming moderate and gentle?

Was he already compromised?

He thought, with satisfaction, of biting the priest. There, at least, he was not. He could be reasonably sure he was not.

But he felt uncertain, all the same.

"Megatron?"

Now it was Ratchet, putting a comforting hand on his own. Megatron tried to give him a reassuring smile, and by the feel of his own face, failed miserably.

"Come on," said Ratchet, and led him out of the room and to his own quarters, as barren of personal touches as Megatron's own, and sat him down on the couch in the anteroom.

"You're afraid," he said.

Megatron stared at his feet, hating to admit it.

Ratchet looked shrewdly into his face. "Do you want to talk about what would have happened to you if you were still a miner and you'd done all these things? Or do you want me to point out you literally have an army at your back of people who care about you very much? They watched you escape from Soundwave's clutches. They saw what that did to you. And they love you for it. They're not going to let you be handed over to Phantasm's idea of justice, no matter what it costs them. Prowl might be right that cooperation, if we can't find a way out of this, is our best option. But I don't think our colleagues are going to cooperate. Can you imagine Sideswipe and Sunstreaker putting up with some little twerp who thinks he's better than you? Regardless of whether other people approved, someone like that would just plain come down with a real bad case of dead. However alone you feel right now, you're not. Your Autobots love you, Megatron. Let us look out for you."

"What if I have no choice but to concede?" said Megatron, quietly. He heard his own fear in his voice. Mirage didn't need to tell him more about his sibling. To someone like that, Megatron would always be a miner. The cruelties of his peers in medical school would pale in comparison to what someone like Phantasm could be like.

"That is not going to happen," said Ratchet firmly. There was fear in his voice, too. "I'm not going to let that happen. I lived through it. You shouldn't have to. You deserve a good partner, someone like Terminus. Someone who will treasure you for who and what you are, not in spite of

it. Not someone who will hurt you for it."

That...wasn't as helpful as Ratchet probably imagined it was. But it was well meant. Right now, Megatron would settle for well meant. "I hate this," he said. "On the battlefield, I can defend myself. I can defend the people counting on me, and I can make the people hurting us pay. But right now there's nothing I can do except go and distract the slagers. To pretend my cooperation. There's nothing to do but dress up and play a game I don't know and I hate and I'm incompetent at."

Ratchet patted his back. "You're doing better than anyone could imagine, kid. Phantasm wasn't going to cut you some slack if you were better at the game. He would have pulled this sooner. Poor young Tracks just got rescued from a horrible fate, that's good, and people like Bumblebee and the other lower-class frames tell me they've been having some serious success recruiting the labor-class mecha in the area. Prowl's not mentioned it yet—I think he's afraid it'll give you ideas—but we might be able to just take the city. We have options. So go out there and distract the bastard while we pull the rug out from under him."

Megatron went to distract the bastard while they tried to pull the rug out from under him.

He chose Ironhide and Jazz to go with him. He would have preferred Impactor, but Ironhide was a lot more likely to keep his temper while Megatron got insulted. He couldn't have Impactor just reaching over and unscrewing Apparition's head for being a fragger.

It turned out to be a wise decision.

They were shown to a small parlor in Phantasm's house and Ironhide and Apparition's bodyguard took up their stations far enough away not to catch any specific words, but close enough to intervene, and glared at each other. Jazz delicately tested every foodstuff on the small low table, almost dancing around Phantasm's own taster, and then took up his station near Ironhide, though the likelihood of him understanding every word were much higher.

Apparition, slender and in blue and silver like Mirage and Phantasm, settled gracefully across from Megatron and gave him a long assessing look before offering him a small goblet of energon. Megatron accepted it and returned Apparition's inspection.

"That won't do," said Apparition in a quiet, musical voice. "You may well be Prime. But you're still a miner. I will not tolerate a mate with affectations above his station."

Megatron took a long slow drink of his energon, as if considering the mech's words. Then said, "Your family was failing in power before the overthrow of the Functionists. A lot of the older, richer families fell with them, did they not?"

"What of it?"

"My ascent to the Primacy, and my actions afterward, directly contributed to your family's rise in power and fortune."

Apparition threw his head back and laughed, a completely annoying noise. Megatron tried not to imagine living with it. "Do you think that gets you out of your contract? That's only good for goodwill. It's not for anything meaningful—as you'd know if you were actually a noble."

"I think it's good for respect," Megatron said. "If nothing more."

"We own you," said Apparition. "Your spark was struck off another, at our request. Your body, designed by our engineers. Your brain, shaped and programmed by our programmers. Your t-cog, carved by our artisans. You were sparked with a batch of a hundred other mecha, no matter that you emerged early with spark irregularities. We educated you and trained you and equipped you and fed you. Everything you are, Reflection Mining had a hand in. Even your most rebellious thoughts run along carefully crafted pathways we designed. Tell me, why should I respect that?" Arrogant golden optics swept over Megatron's frame again. "So what if you're Prime? We know there are fakes out there. And as far as I'm concerned, you're carrying one of them. The Matrix would never have chosen someone like you. You're a violent, crude warlord at best. My job is to rein you in."

"I won't be reined in."

Apparition laughed at him again. "Believe me, we have ways. But we can be more friendly than that, can't we? You're going to be pampered, Megatron. Everything you could desire. Good energon and hot oil baths. I won't want you taking other lovers, of course, but I promise I can be very attentive." His eyes brightened with sadistic glee. "Who knows, once we've sparkmerged you might not find this so bad."

"Sparkmerged?" said Megatron, feeling semiprocessed fuel rising in the back of his intake. "No."

"Oh, you thought this was going to be bloodless and political?" said Apparition. "It's important mates don't lie to each other, Megatron. And you can't lie in a merge."

"No," said Megatron. "No. I'm not sparkmerging with you." It was all he had left, he realized with a sick lurch. His brain had been tampered with by the Functionists. His body by the Matrix, and he still felt ill when he thought of Optimus's hands on him.

"It's non-negotiable," said Apparition coldly. "The conjunxing won't be considered final without it."

"It will be negotiable," said Megatron. He knew better to look for mercy in those cruel golden optics but he tried anyway, hoping someone else would hear it and be swayed. "My intended, the mech I would have conjunxed, died to let me make that speech. I will lend my spark to no other, and most certainly not to a mech who views me as property and with disgust."

Apparition's smile was thin and cold. "How romantic. Romance has no place in our world, Megatron. No place in politics. And neither does garnering the pity of others. You will agree to the contract and you will behave yourself. Or we'll drive you out of the city and you lose the war."

Megatron squared his shoulders and matched him smile for smile. "And you lose the war, too. Do you think the Decepticons are going to keep you in power? They'll act nice to start with. After all, you'll have gotten rid of an annoyance for them. And one day you'll wake up with a coup in progress. Or you won't wake up at all. Starscream likes power, Apparition, maybe even more than you do. And I promise you, he has more ability to take it than you do to keep it. You need me. Your household and your city need me."

"You're already in the crosshairs of the Decepticons," said Apparition. "And if we need you, so be it. But you're the one at the head of a train of refugees. You're the one they want dead. Your need is a lot closer and a lot stronger than mine. It's a stupid, selfish time to have qualms about your spark."

He got up and walked around the table. Megatron tensed up despite himself as Apparition sat down next to him, putting a firm hand on his knee. "Don't you want to make this work? It's the easiest way to fix this whole mess. Your Autobots deserve leadership. A mech willing to lay down everything for them."

"I've already done that," said Megatron, "and in more profound ways than you can imagine, you preening whining fool."

"Are you turning me down?" asked Apparition. "You're in my creator's house. It will be quite easy to enforce the penalties for recalcitrant miners."

No one had noticed Jazz slipping around the corner. But Apparition suddenly gasped and stiffened, tipping his head up. Jazz had a small blade to the mech's face.

"You want to reconsider that?" said Jazz.

Apparition's bodyguard surged forward. Ironhide put him down in two economical movements, then grinned viciously at Apparition.

"You threatened the Prime," said Jazz, perfectly level and calm. "Assassination is one thing; you just make sure not to get caught. But a threat? That carries a death sentence. No matter whether he's in debt to you. No one is gonna complain if I kill you. No one would dare. How about this. No matter how this shakes out, you never, ever, touch him without his explicit consent again. You don't threaten him. You treat him with respect. Or I will fragging peel your face off."

"Jazz," said Megatron, quellingly. Jazz looked at him, saw his expression, and withdrew the knife. Apparition gasped with relief, fingers flying up to examine his face.

Megatron was quiet while he did, waiting until he'd calmed somewhat before saying, "You did threaten me. That was foolish. Take a moment to look at the mecha in this room. I chose them because they are the calmest of my Autobots. The ones I could trust to keep level heads no matter how you insulted them."

Apparition looked. Apparition gulped.

"You need my Autobots to hold this city," Megatron said, in as close to Ratchet's lecturing voice as he could. "You don't want them angry with you. You've made a significant mistake in singling me out, by the way; you assume that I, like you, rule over subjects indifferent to my existence." He looked down his nose at the noble. "I only hold the power I do because my Autobots have seen fit to grant that power to me. Even if I accepted your offer of courtship, they would not transfer it to you without substantial reason. Nor would I retain power or control if I started betraying their trust, as you most assuredly mean me to do."

"That's true," Jazz said.

"You want the Autobots as allies, Apparition," said Megatron. "You don't want me as a pet, because you won't get the Autobots if you do that. And without them, do you really stand a chance against the Decepticons? I don't think you do."

Apparition was still silent.

"And still less do you want my Autobots deciding this city is a threat," he said. "We might not win a fight with you. But we would cripple your defenses on the way down, and Optimus and Starscream wouldn't even bother to negotiate with you then. They'd just conquer you."

Megatron rose. "Think on that," he said. "And remind your creator to think on that. Ironhide, let him up. Jazz."

The two of them followed him out. At last Jazz said, "Megatron, I'm sorry... I couldn't..."

"And yet you lecture me on my temper," said Megatron, too amused and perhaps a little smug to be actually angry with Jazz. "Next time you do that, I'm reminding you of today."

"Fair enough. Frag." Jazz ducked his head. "I really fragged up. *Frag*. I'm sorry, mech, I heard him threaten you like that and just, I couldn't let him do that, I couldn't let him push you into that by threatening you with—with whatever they do to 'recalcitrant miners'."

"Sometimes they simply disassemble you. Usually they push you into a smelting pit," said Megatron. "More efficient. If you really fragged up, everyone watches. And if you torqued someone off personally, they can get inventive. After all, you're not really a person until your creation debt's been paid off. You're spare parts... and if the most use they can get out of you is melting you down and trying again, that's what they do."

"Primus." Jazz sounded sick. "And he was threatening you with that if you didn't..."

"You may have been helpful, actually." Megatron huffed out a vent. "It allowed me to cast the Autobots as a dangerous force on whom I alone have a handle."

"Not so subtle threats of violence. I like it," said Ironhide. "Primus, that was satisfying." He smiled at his knuckles.

Jazz still looked shamefaced. He looked shamefaced all the way home.

"How did it *really* go?" asked Prowl, once they were alone for a brief recharge. The planning had moved to one of the common areas.

"I lost my temper," Jazz said. "Megatron really did rescue the situation, as best he could, I guess. But I lost my temper and it was *bad*."

"How bad?" said Prowl.

"I put a knife to Apparition's throat and threatened to peel his face off," said Jazz.

Prowl's optics blanched, and he sat heavily on the berth. "And why," he managed after a while, "did you decide to put a knife to Apparition's throat and threaten to peel his face off?"

"He threatened the Prime," said Jazz, in a small voice. He'd felt appalled at himself and ashamed enough imagining Prowl's reaction. Sitting under his mate's startled, disapproving gaze was worse than he'd expected.

"With what," said Prowl.

"He'd been..." Jazz paused, then the words came out all in a rush. "He'd been lewd and foul telling Megatron what he'd expect from him in a conjunxing, and then told him he expected Megatron's spark, too. Megatron refused." There the words stopped. Jazz ducked his head and reset his vocalizer repeatedly, emotion making it click offline.

"Apparition threatened him," he said, slow and reluctant.

"How did Apparition threaten him?" Prowl's voice was slow and careful.

"He said the punishments for a recalcitrant miner would be easy to enforce, in his creator's house." Jazz reset his vocalizer again. "Did you know that they would have thrown him alive into a smelting pit? Do you know how long that would take to kill a miner, with their plating, and agony all the while? Or that sometimes they just—just vivisected them, for their parts? He threatened Megatron with *that*, if he didn't give him his spark. His spark, Prowl!" He drew a sharp, ragged vent. "He wanted to force him to share that with him. He didn't want him very much he just wanted his—his pain, the control. And he was threatening to torture him to death if he didn't give him that."

"So you put a knife to his throat and threatened to peel his face off," said Prowl, evenly.

Jazz nodded jerkily.

"Jazz," said Prowl. "Come here." He moved back on the berth, back against the wall, and Jazz climbed up to lean against him. Prowl slid his arms around Jazz's waist and nuzzled into his neck. "I love you," he said softly, letting them sit together like that for a time. Jazz huffed out a longer, shaking vent and leaned his head back against Prowl's shoulder.

"Do you think your judgement might be somewhat compromised where Megatron is concerned?" Prowl asked, still in that same gentle voice.

"Primus," said Jazz. "Yes."

"And can you tell me why?" Prowl moved his hands, beginning to rub out the knots of tension at the base of Jazz's doorwings.

Jazz let out a small noise of frustration and worry. Then, before he lost his courage, said, "I love him."

Prowl didn't even seem surprised. Didn't even falter rubbing the bases of his doorwings. "Hm. I thought so. You would like us to trine with him."

"Yes," said Jazz, and then, "Why aren't you more surprised?"

"Do you think I'm completely blind to what my partner is like when he's in love?" said Prowl. "Do you have so little faith in me?"

Jazz sputtered. "I thought you didn't approve of him!"

"Of his actions," said Prowl coolly. "But you're important to me. And we are looking for a third. I trust you have your reasons."

"He saved my life."

"Plenty of people have saved your life," said Prowl. "You haven't fragged all of them. And you've fallen in love with still fewer."

"Just you," said Jazz.

"And now Megatron." Prowl eased Jazz onto the bed, then curled up around him. "Why else?"

Jazz made a frustrated noise. "I don't know! He's—he's him! He gets up after the worst things he can imagine have happened and then he comes back for the people who rely on him even with the energon and lubricant running down his face! Ratchet tries to pretend he's all right and Megatron still sees through it and looks after him! He ran across a fragging battlefield with nothing but a shield to save everyone he could, he charged Functionist artillery to save refugees, he's brilliant and he—he cares. He has no illusions about what people are like but he still cares, he still defends them. How couldn't I? And I won't see him in a relationship where the other mech just... just despises him. Just wants to score points against him. Just wants him to *hurt*. He's been through so much and *he deserves better*."

Prowl was silent, simply running a hand over his back.

"I don't see him the same way you do," he said. "I think you know how I see him. He's brave, yes, and his dedication is admirable. But I see a more dangerous side of him—he's impulsive. There's neither tactics nor strategy in his behavior; it's a simple instinct to protect himself or others, or revenge himself, and I'm afraid that even training won't lessen the danger of that. The basal instinct to hurt, in one way or another, no matter the reason. A mech as dedicated as him is a monster, one way or another. And if *he* doesn't know that, if he doesn't learn to put a leash on that, to take action knowing his basic impulses can't be trusted, and to know when and where to *stop*...despite his dedication and love for the people he defends, I fear what he'll become." His grip tightened. "And I don't want him pulling *you* along behind him. You tread that line as it is, Jazz. It's no easy thing, and I deeply respect that you can do it. You don't need someone else pulling your spark to the other side of it."

"You're afraid he'll go mad on us?" said Jazz, bewildered by the idea.

"I'm afraid he'll get so wrapped up in his cause that he'll forget what it is to be a mech. Mercy and kindness and knowing where to stop. The things you cannot do, no matter the justification. Justice without mercy is no justice at all."

"You've always had the luxury of functioning in the light," said Jazz, and he couldn't help it—there was a bitterness to it.

"I have," said Prowl. "I won't deny that."

There was a silence.

"I love you because you can tread that line, among many other things, and I love you because I can only begin to imagine the strength it takes. The uncertainty. I trust you to keep your spark in the face of what you do." Prowl huffed out a long vent. "I don't know Megatron as well. And from what I know of him, I very much fear he'll fling himself over that line intentionally, if he thinks it will serve his cause. Protect the Autobots, rebuild Cybertron. Perhaps it'll be the nobler of choices, in the long run. But I don't want our sparks tethered to such a mech."

The rest was unspoken. Because either they'd fail, or they'd win. And Jazz knew perfectly well the type of mech that sort of thing could make someone. The sort of mech who wouldn't see peace unless it was in front of his optics, who would continue driving toward an impossibly perfect version of his vision, no matter the bodies in his path. The type of mech who would, in the end, need to be put down by his own people, imprisoned or dead.

The problem was, he didn't think Prowl was wrong. He knew exactly the line Prowl spoke of. And he was pretty sure Prowl's view of him walking the edge of it gave him more credit than he deserved; he *knew* he'd taken deliberate steps off of it, as he had today, as he had lying there and *watching Soundwave peel Megatron's fragging brain open*. And he also knew that he was

completely right. Megatron was in a way already a monster, though one holding tight to his spark, and the sort of war he imagined coming wouldn't let the mech hold onto his spark that way much longer. Trial and insult after torment and pain would force him to armor that spark at the very least; the hardening that came with survival, the *I'm suffering too, and I cannot feel for what I'm doing because if I do it will destroy me and I cannot let myself be destroyed* that accumulated over years. No mech who had spent time in the gutter came out of it innocent. Every last one had done terrible things to people as helpless as they'd been to survive, things that still woke them in the depths of the night. Before meeting Prowl, Jazz hadn't killed in the line of duty, but he had to save his own spark, and only a few of those he'd killed had been active threats to him. It was how the world worked. Or had worked, and would work unless they actually did realize Megatron's vision of an egalitarian future. How much of any of them would remain once they realized that?

Less of Megatron than anyone else, at the end, because that was what leadership *did*.

Jazz still loved him.

He wondered if Megatron could see the fingers of that future reaching out for him, the torment and cruelty that he would have to accept inflicting. The things he might swear never to do that he would, in the end, do. Because the alternative was so much worse.

He wanted to be there to pull him back.

But it would be Prowl's spark, too, at risk. And because it was the two of them, Jazz couldn't make that decision for him.

"I'll consider him," said Prowl gently. "I trust your judgement, Jazz. If you love him as well, I know you have very good reason."

"And I trust yours," said Jazz. "I...I don't think you're wrong. But what if we could make a difference?"

"That kind of thinking can be very dangerous," said Prowl. "Don't get into relationships to save people."

Jazz laughed wryly. "You're one to talk. Patron saint of lost causes."

"You weren't lost where it matters," said Prowl, rapping a fist over Jazz's spark. "Physically, professionally, certainly. But not here."

"I don't think he's lost, either," said Jazz.

"Yet," said Prowl. "I'll consider him, Jazz. Seriously so, because your judgment is generally sound, threats of face-peeling aside. But what if we can't save him—what if we can't keep him himself?"

"I don't think that's ever a guarantee," said Jazz. "We're second and third in command of the Autobots, Prowl. Our sparks are at risk, too."

Prowl let out a long huff. "All the more reason to avoid tethering all three of us together," he said, but there was a wry humor to it that made it clear he'd be considering Megatron no less seriously for it.

"Thank you," said Jazz, to the unspoken promise there, and offlined his optics, glad to be held. It was some defense against the knowledge of just how badly he'd fragged up. That he might have put Megatron in more trouble than he'd saved him.

"Jazz?"

"Yes?"

"No more threats to the nobility, please."

Jazz laughed a little. "I'll try not to."

Megatron shouldn't have felt so encouraged by Jazz's murderous impulses, but on reflection the expression of terror on Apparition's face had been very good. Oddly enough, he couldn't remember much of his own emotions during the encounter. They should have been strong; Apparition had presented him with a choice between violation of spark and frame and a life of servitude to the very masters he sought to overthrow, or the worst cruelties of the mines, and yet, there was nothing.

Maybe he was used to it, long memory and instinct conspiring to calm rather than frighten. Stand before your supervisor and keep yourself small and nonthreatening and calm because if you scare him...

The idea sent a bolt of very visceral disgust through him, that he'd been so well trained, and he rose quickly to find where his people were meeting now Jazz and Prowl had kicked them out. This time, they were in the proper place; what had once been a study room and now had been converted into a strategy room. Nothing much had changed since the previous night. Still a frightened boil of his advisors and officers. He settled in to hear the next round of suggestions, hoping their intimidation of Apparition somehow worked in their favor.

An hour later, there was a sharp rap on the door. Mirage opened it, gaped, and quickly stood aside to let Tyrest into the swarming room.

Tyrest stood there, sweeping them all with a calm golden gaze, and people froze as it swept over them. He then turned that gaze on Megatron, who'd risen.

"Dominus led me to believe that you might require a legal expert," he said. "I've reviewed the particulars of the case. I'm pleased to inform you it's simple enough; the Prime cannot be in debt."

Silence. "You mean all this was for nothing!" said Cliffjumper into that silence, dropped the datafiles he carried, and stalked out. Sideswipe slunk after him.

Tyrest looked around the room again, evidently relishing the reactions, though his expression didn't change. He produced his own small sheaf of datapads and spread them on the table. "It's simple enough," he said. "A debt would allow someone leverage over the Prime, which is unacceptable, since the Prime is supposedly Primus's representative in the corporeal world. A little-known clause, since previous Primes were hardly from classes inclined to get themselves into debt," he looked sternly at Megatron, "and new enough, but the theological grounding is solid."

"Recent?" said Prowl, thoughtfully.

"Recent," confirmed Tyrest. "Relatively speaking. It's been well buried. Nova Prime is the reason it exists." His expression soured. "It was...petty."

"Petty?" said Jazz, sounding on the cusp of laughter, relief and disbelief together.

"Petty," confirmed Tyrest. "He didn't want to pay a gambling debt he incurred. So he passed that law, and then, when pressed on the matter, a second one declaring it illegal to hold or attempt to hold a Prime's debt."

"So my creator is in violation of the law in attempting to hold Megatron responsible," said Mirage.

"He is."

"Do you think he knows this?"

"Very likely. Very likely he doesn't see it as a threat, since he doesn't believe you to have a legal expert on your side." Tyrest looked down his elegant nose at Megatron. "Megatron, after all, has little to support him aside from the House of Ambus, and since there's little reason for Dominus to concern himself with the law surrounding creation debts—" his glance flicked to Dominus, "I do understand you bought Rewind's outright and forgave it, did you not?—and the law was never popularized because of its origin, I believe he thought it a reasonable gamble. After all, it's not been invoked since Nova's time."

"I feel a fool," said Dominus. "I should have at least thought... all our legal experts are focused on civil rights, not the intricacies of Primal law..."

"Of course," said Tyrest, graciously.

Megatron reset his vocalizer. "Orator Tyrest," he said, remembering the mech's proper title at the last moment and glad of it, "thank you for your help. I was wondering if we could take it a step further."

"A step further," said Tyrest.

"What's the statute of limitations for violations of labor conditions for indentured laborers?" asked Megatron. "Of necessity, this interaction revealed Reflection Mining as the owner of my creation debt and Phantasm as the owner of that corporation. If I recall correctly, the conditions I worked in were not legal, and kept that way through intimidation, which is even less so."

"Hm," said Tyrest. "I doubt it will be necessary to deal with the current issue. A mention to Phantasm that you're well aware of the illegality of his gamble here should put the matter to rest."

"I don't want the matter put to rest," said Megatron. "I want Phantasm and his Household dealt with. They seem to be the nexus of our opposition, and we are short on time. If his allies remain, and if I must have them at my back when the Decepticons inevitably attack, I want them worried. I want them thinking twice before putting a knife in my back. And if we can make a big enough legal scandal to drive Phantasm offworld..."

A moment passed. Tyrest's glance went to Mirage, where he stood nervously by the door, then back to Megatron, a question.

Megatron smiled a very little in response.

"I see," said Tyrest, and there may have been a flicker of approval in his expression. "Let us look into that."

To Megatron's absolute shock, some of the things Reflection Mining had done to him and his fellow miners actually counted, legally, as murder, torture, and sentient trafficking. That things he'd been told his whole function were absolute fact were, in fact, lies. Impactor got drawn in after a bit; he hadn't been privy to the same horrors Megatron had, because he'd earned out his contract some time before things had gotten really terrible and had never been sent to the more remote outposts. But he could corroborate a portion of it, and then Tyrest sent some of his own staff to collect records and some to nearby mining outposts for other statements, outright voiding a handful of contracts to obtain witnesses.

"What happened to you was wrong," he said in a practiced, professional way. It was the sort of polished delivery Megatron expected from a mech that had delivered it thousands of times to nervous clients. "That much is clear. We'll gather data and make a case for an official investigation; it'll be more powerful if it comes from what government Iacon still possesses than from a single mech. That should take a few weeks, but the mere announcement of an investigation, should it occur, will alarm Phantasm and his people extremely. Any investigation will get into their financial records, and if there is anything the nobility truly dislike, it's people examining their finances."

That in motion, they confronted Phantasm the next day. Or, rather, Megatron did.

"Your ploy was indeed concerning," he told Phantasm as they strolled through the crystal gardens outside some noble's mansion.

"Was?" said Phantasm. "Despite your lackey's considerable rudeness to my creation, it was no ploy at all. Have you made a decision?"

Megatron let out a long vent, playing at being reluctant, then turned a smile on Phantasm. "It was a ploy, and an illegal one at that. The Prime's debts cannot be enforced. And no matter what else I am, I am still Prime. I believe an attempt to hold or collect a debt from the Prime is punishable by both a fine and a period in prison."

Phantasm gulped.

"And you've annoyed me to such an extent that I think I will be consulting the courts on the matter," Megatron added. "Poisoning I can accept as a matter of ambition and high spirits; I can even accept that odious priest and his excuse for a sermon as a difference of opinion," he couldn't really, but it made him sound good, "but forcing me into a bonding with threats of the mines? No. That cannot be excused in such friendly terms. You pushed too far, Phantasm, and you've found the extent of my good temper."

"You bit Ecclesiastimus's finger off!" said Phantasm.

"Yes," said Megatron mildly. "That was, indeed, my *good* temper."

Phantasm gaped at him. "You—you and your crude threats!" he snapped and went silent as Megatron leaned forward.

"Apparition doubtless told you of my dead lover," he said, slow and measured. "The Functionists killed him before we finished the conjunx ritus. But you started that process. We both worked for Reflection Mining, and when the accident happened, when a piece of your *subpar* equipment malfunctioned and *dumped the ceiling on him*, you left him to *die* of his injuries. Would

you like to hear about how he screamed in the dark as I tried to patch him? Would you like to hear about how they told me to let him be taken away and killed, would you like to hear me tell you about how your supervisors, your *employees* flogged me for stealing from the mess hall when I saved my ration for him, or his coughing and the way his systems sputtered for fuel as he dropped painfully toward stasis in our dark little room, would you like to hear how *painful* it is to set up a direct energon line for the first time *in the dark*, but I did it because it was the only way to keep *the mech I loved alive*? Do you want to hear about how much he wanted to live but how he begged me to let him die because of what he feared your supervisors would do to me for saving him? Your hands didn't strike the killing blow but they were responsible for his torment and you're a fool to think I'll forget that."

He straightened up again, suddenly aware he'd been leaning in, and drew a vent. "Perhaps I make a mistake being so selfish," he said. "What about my brethren sold to aliens? The ones smelted or dismantled for disobedience? What of all the other Terminuses, sentenced to die by inches because of the expense of their repairs? My rage is selfish but it is all so easily extrapolated across all your holdings. The biggest and fastest growing mining corporation on Cybertron, wasn't it? Built on our deaths. Our pain. Our fear."

He looked down his nose at Phantasm, mimicking Tyrest's expression. "The Prime is a bad enemy to have, Phantasm," he said, quiet and cool. "And let me assure you. I am your enemy. I believe you should be getting the summons in the morning."

He turned away. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have members of the court to talk to who will still be relevant to the defense of this city. Goodbye."

The summons did indeed arrive the next morning.

It did not find Phantasm, nor Apparition, nor Phantasm's consort, Illusion. Specter, the remaining member of the Household, promptly denounced the attempt.

Specter only lasted as long as Tyrest's preliminary investigation. When the news of the official investigation arrived, he, too, fled offworld with a portion of the family's funds. The Household was absorbed by the House one of Phantasm's siblings had consorted to, another large conservative household, and one that promptly turned Reflection public, in order to avoid the fees, which placed it directly under the interim Council's authority.

And, in theory at least, the Prime's, once he was officially accepted.

"Which you aren't," said Mirage, evidently glad to have dodged having to carry his House through the impending investigation. "We still have work to do. A lot of it. There's another ball this evening, and you're scuffed already. Go see Sunstreaker, and we've got new decorations for your helm you'll need to try after that."

Megatron, who'd been expecting a little socialization-free time after vanquishing an enemy so definitely, sighed heavily and went to do as he was told.

To his surprise, his full command staff joined him, all equally polished. "We have some advance intelligence," said Prowl. "I think a united front will be useful tonight."

Megatron frowned, puzzled, but nodded all the same.

Sure enough, in the midst of the socializing and the dancing, a panting military courier came into the room and went directly to Dominus, then, after a short consultation with Dominus, to Tyrest, who reset his optics and signaled the orchestra to stop playing. Once the confused clatter of a hastily halted ballroom subsided, Tyrest raised his arms and his voice.

"Fellow Iaconians," he said, and people bristled—they were used to being addressed as *my lords and distinguished guests*, "one of our military outposts has just reported in. The Decepticons have marched on Vos."

There was a stunned silence and the beginning of a hubbub until Tyrest raised his voice once more. "*And they have taken it.*"

The silence this time had a different quality than the ones before. Even these pampered, preening sots knew what that meant, the realization settling into Megatron's processor, too. Optimus now had air superiority. The Seekers, for Vos's ruling class might despise him and all he stood for, but they cared about their own survival, too.

Slowly, the nobles in the room turned and looked at them, the group of Autobots in their simple, almost austere paint. At Megatron, the bulk of his shoulders and the thickness of his armor and his claws and fangs and the paint job Mirage had done on his face; something beautiful and fierce and cold and untouchable, the picture of a military hero of old, the darkening of his lips showing the sharpness of his fangs.

They looked, without calculation.

They looked at him with a mixture of fear and hope. Pleading, almost. Here was the terror of their minds springing full realized for their necks, and they looked to him to protect them. Optimus was in Vos, and Optimus had—or would have soon—the most feared air force in all their history at his back, and they felt a Decepticon claw at their throats and a Decepticon boot on their chests, and they looked to their own monster, hoping he was placated enough to aid them.

Megatron looked at them looking at him and realized with a jolt that he had won.

Iacon was his.

Chapter 80

Megatron's formal ascension—his second one, in fact, but what the Functionists had done barely counted—was the next morning.

Predictably, he hated it.

If he'd thought having his crest on display at a party was bad, walking down the grand avenues of Iacon with it on full display was a lot worse. It was supposed to be sensitive enough to detect small changes in air pressure deep in the mines. Out here, every breeze sent a host of warnings and alerts straight into his processor, all tagged high priority, because as far as his systems were concerned, that crest would only come out in an emergency and every shift of wind could mean a way out of the cave in they were *certain* he was trapped in.

He was going to have a headache after this, he could tell. And if his sensory crest didn't do it, his audials would, because there was a lot of amplified yelling and singing involved and he hated that, too. And standing out and alone surrounded by priests without his Autobots, as if all of this was just...just because they thought Primus would reach through him and *do* something about the Decepticons, and that wasn't how this was going to work.

They finally reached the steps of the Basilica and there was chanting and muttering and getting up and down and turning around occasionally to show off, all things he'd been carefully coached on all the previous night, and then came the last part, coming up to the statue of Primus before him and prostrating himself.

This particular statue wasn't much like the others; it was supposed to be more on a scale with the Prime, as opposed to the traditional Primuses, who led one to believe their creator god had been roughly shuttle sized. This one was old, though. No fierce grim countenance of a warrior ready to draw his sword; Primus here was built a little lighter than most of those, almost like someone in a clerical caste, and his hands weren't on his sword but spread in welcome.

Megatron looked at the statue and thought about the full prostration he was expected to perform, and something in him, once again, rebelled.

He walked up to the statue, clasped its forearm in a firm and friendly grip, and inclined his helm a little—a greeting to a more experienced, but not necessarily more senior, colleague.

There was a stunned silence.

"If you do love us, you won't mind us *not* kneeling to you," he told Primus softly. "The time for kneeling is over. It's given the wrong people the wrong ideas."

The whole stage was amplified, of course. His words carried to the crowd anyway.

The stunned silence got still deeper as he turned around and this time he *did* bow—still not the total prostration he'd been told to perform but neat and simple and formal.

It was not only what seemed like the right thing to do, but it was also what was necessary. The Primes of old were all depicted with their faces upturned to Primus, or downturned to the core of the planet where He was supposed to slumber. But they were looking the wrong way. An emissary between a god and a people had two masters to serve, not one; the god was the entity with power, whereas the people had little to protect themselves from those in power, who claimed to be so close to that god. If Primus existed, Megatron's job was not to pass His dictates to Cybertron. It

was to pass the needs of Cybertronians to a god who had evidently forgotten them. It was to do something to correct that balance.

Megatron wasn't too sure about whether Primus existed. But he could see the problems in front of him, and he'd do what he could to take care of the people who stared up at him in varying states of shock at his apparent blasphemy.

He wouldn't fail them.

"Congratulations, they hate you more than ever," said Prowl, flatly.

"They can't do anything about it, can they?" Megatron leaned his head on one hand and contemplated the delicacies on the table in front of him, debating continuing to eat out of pure greed. He should have scorned the notion, knowing that there were far too many mecha who didn't have enough, but he had to admit the temptation to continue tasting the various objects before him was nearly overwhelming.

There was something there, something profound, to do with the immediate pastry as versus the abstract (to you) but real suffering around you. It was insidious, seen from this side, and it made him angry. He pushed the platter subtly toward Ratchet, who plucked something off it and bit without looking away from the datapad he was perusing.

Now that their regime in Iacon was properly established, they were getting their own influx of displaced persons. Ratchet had been up all night with the more urgent cases. There were still worrying stains on his armor where the solvent of the fast visit to the washracks hadn't reached.

Ratchet went for a second pastry. He probably wasn't even tasting them.

That probably furthered the analogy, but Megatron himself had been involved in the last part of that influx, and was too tired to think of it.

"Don't keep antagonizing the religious conservatives," said Prowl, sounding tired. "They're aggravating—"

"They stand for everything I loathe," said Megatron.

"—and they feel the same way about you," said Prowl. "You did bite one of their favorite people."

"He deserved it." Megatron was done feeling guilty about that. "He went after Ratchet."

"Huh?" said Ratchet, looking up with his mouth full.

Prowl pinched the bridge of his nose. "You vanquished their leaders. The Decepticons are coming and you look like their best bet. That's what you've got going for you right now. That's *all*. It's not going to save you from dissent among your own ranks. It's not going to save your plating, either, should one of those fraggers decide to assassinate or challenge you. Don't risk it; we need you alive."

Megatron sighed heavily. "I'll attempt to behave."

"Lord Optimus, Commander Starscream, you asked to review all Outlier recruits

personally?" The Decepticon in the doorway of the command center looked back over his shoulder and gulped, then glanced in at them again. "This one arrived a few days ago."

"Send him in," said Optimus, dismissing the campaign map with a flick of his fingers.

"Wonder if this one's going to be any good," muttered Starscream. "Or if it'll be something stupid like finding lugnuts."

"Starscream," said Optimus, reproofing.

The mech in question stepped into the command center. He was as big as Megatron had been, maybe a little broader in the shoulders. His paint was purple, a deep rich color a few shades darker than his insignia. The second tread of the triple row of tank treads on his shoulders hung loose, like a cape. The turrets of his altmode jutted up to either side behind them.

His face was terribly scarred. Optimus heard the hitch of Starscream's vents next to him as he noticed that; for his part, he hid most of his expression behind his battlemask, keeping his instinctive horror and pity at what had happened to the mech hidden.

The new mech paused a few steps inside the door, then saluted.

"And what's your name then?" demanded Starscream, harsh.

"My name is Tarn," said the mech, and it was an utterly beautiful voice that seemed to snag on the edges of the spark, plucking a mixture of admiration and grief from Optimus's. The scarring on the mech's face was probably the work of the Functionists, he realized. It was just like them to damage someone like this from spite.

"And your abilities?"

The expression that stole over Tarn's face was undeniably a smile, slow and vicious. "I can kill people with my voice."

Optimus and Starscream looked at each other. "We'll need proof," said Starscream.

"Who would you like me to kill?" asked Tarn, pleasantly enough.

"We can either wait to test you in battle, or..." Starscream looked up at Optimus and drew him aside, murmuring, "We do have the prisoners. Especially Recourse."

Recourse, who was already sentenced to death, the local mining company's administrator in charge of "penalties".

They'd found his records. He'd been lucky not to have been murdered on the spot, after that. Optimus had known that mining companies inflicted horrific punishments on their workers, but the rows of notes and figures had turned even his tanks. The half-slugged remains of the mecha surrendered to Recourse's tender mercies had made some of his hardened Decepticons sick.

How could Megatron have turned away from the Decepticons, with that in his memory banks? He'd probably seen some of those company-sanctioned murders. How could he have gone to the very people who had ordered them?

"We're going to shoot him anyway," Starscream pointed out. "He might as well do something useful in the process."

It was an ugly notion. But war was ugly. And if Tarn did have the skill he claimed to, he'd be a powerful weapon. Recourse's crimes had been horrific, and he'd already had his chance to defend himself; he was guilty without a doubt.

The idea didn't sit well with Optimus, but it seemed reasonable. Still, he hesitated a few moments; no matter the mech's crimes, it seem right to bring anyone in for an experimental butchery.

Then he pushed the notion aside. The mech had done nothing but engage in butchery for his own entertainment his entire function. "Do it," he said. There would be a sort of justice to it, after all.

Still, his spark hummed with misgivings as Recourse was brought in. The mech obviously expected to be pardoned; he wasn't resisting his guards, optics fixed confidently on Optimus. "I knew you'd see sense," he said, as soon as the guards dropped him and left. "Every good rebellion needs an interrogator."

"You vastly misunderstand the situation," said Starscream. Optimus glanced at Tarn, whose optics were fixed on the markings that identified Recourse as a penalty administrator. Tarn's expression was both startled and grim. Optimus wondered if he'd been a miner.

Starscream motioned Tarn forward. "Tarn. He's all yours. Do we need to stand out of range?"

"No. It's specific and targeted by spark frequency," said Tarn. He went to the mech and knelt in front of him, humming a long deep note that made Optimus feel physically uncomfortable.

"No pointless suffering," he said aloud. Tarn bobbed his helm in a nod.

Recourse suddenly jerked and screamed. "There we are," said Tarn. He began to talk. The words weren't important; they were something about the cruelties of the mines, confirming Optimus's suspicions. But Tarn's voice got quieter and slower, and Recourse's optics stared blankly ahead as the mech twitched and jerked and then screamed once more, a terrible, broken-off sound. His optics flared; Tarn stepped back quickly, and the room flared once, briefly, with sparklight.

The gray corpse collapsed to the floor.

Optimus and Starscream stared at it.

"Very impressive," said Starscream, after a long moment. "Welcome to the Decepticons, Tarn."

Tarn looked at Optimus as Starscream laid out the specifics of the Outlier unit they were putting together. Optimus felt a chill creep over his spark, a sense of looking at something uncanny and inimical, even though Tarn was just a mech. Worse still, he felt that the evaluation somehow sullied him, made him as strange and cruel as the mech staring at him.

He wondered if, someday, the only way to end the war would be with Megatron kneeling where Recourse had, and the thought sickened him.

He pushed the thought away.

With Megatron and the remains of the Functionists arrayed against them, they needed Tarn.

All of this was necessary.

Attempting to behave was about all Megatron was willing to do, and he didn't get much practice at it, either. Prowl was completely right: Megatron's victories hadn't, in fact, completely quashed his opposition. Some of them were still very much out to make trouble.

And while walking in the crystal gardens in search of a quiet place to read reports, he found one of them.

"Oh, I know you heard me," a voice was saying, quite close by. "Cease sniveling. You knew what you were doing when you did it."

"I really don't want to fight you," said Hound's voice, placating. He was trying to sound calm, but the waver in his voice betrayed him.

"Perhaps you should have considered that before breaking a noble's contract," said the other voice, measured and cold. "I intend to call you to account for that, even if Phantasm is no longer here to do so."

Hound's vents hissed, and his pedes crunched on the pathway as he retreated. "I am not fighting you," he said firmly, and Megatron, hesitating just around the bend in the path, felt a flicker of pride in the mech. He was obviously afraid, yet standing his ground. He'd wait a few more moments before interfering; if Hound could see the mech off by himself, it would do him enormous good. "Mirage is his own mech, and can make his own decisions. If that decision didn't involve you, my sympathies. But I'm not turning this into some kind of contest. He's made his decision."

"Spoken like a mech happy with his victory," said the other voice. "But this isn't about your preferences. It's about the law. And even your godless excuse for a Prime can't change that."

So much for that. Megatron huffed an irritated vent and rolled his optics skyward, then stepped into view. "Actually," he said, "I can."

They froze and looked at him. Megatron eyed the mech intimidating Hound, recognizing him. "Star Saber. Kindly release Hound. He is one of my Autobots and thus under my protection."

"He stole my mate," said Star Saber, straightening up and turning to face Megatron. "I'm within my rights to duel him."

"And it so happens that I, as the Prime, can usurp those rights by dueling you in his place. He's my liegemech, after all." Megatron smirked at the way Star Saber's optics narrowed. He'd been studying. "And as the challenged party, I get to name the terms."

Star Saber sneered. "As if you've dueled anyone in your function."

Megatron folded his arms and smirked. He had not, in fact, dueled anyone in his function. But he wasn't going to let that get in the way. "You'd be surprised. Tomorrow morning, courtyard of the Basilica, swords. To first blood, unless you'd really like to see just how proficient I am at offlining mecha who threaten my people."

The bit of video of him facing down the Functionists was fairly popular at this point; he had to thank Rewind for that, who'd dug it up from one of the tank-cams. Star Saber had seen it, by the way his optics widened.

"Then I can humiliate you down in the full view of Primus," he said, puffing himself up. "As you deserve. Name your second."

"Prowl," said Megatron instantly, because Prowl would be no fun to deal with for the other party, and that might slightly compensate for how little fun he'd be for Megatron to deal with.

Star Saber blustered, named a mech Megatron wasn't familiar with, and stalked away. Hound brushed himself off and regarded Megatron with worry. "Not that I have any illusions about my ability to handle that, Prime, but do you think that's wise?"

"Wiser than *telling Prowl* is going to be," muttered Megatron. Then he thumped Hound on the back. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Chapter 81

Prowl's long, slow stare of deep disapproval and disappointment was something Megatron sincerely hoped never to receive again.

After a while, Prowl took a deep breath and steeped his fingers. "Megatron," he said, slowly, "I did tell you not to aggravate the religious conservatives. I fail to see how *challenging the one most likely to kill you in any way* takes that into consideration."

"Would you prefer Hound to fight him instead?" said Megatron levelly. He folded his arms. "That was the alternative. And Hound had no chance. It's only to first blood in any case."

"Stabbing you through the neck *is* first blood," snapped Prowl, closing the distance between them and prodding Megatron in the neck cables to make his point. "Which is a great way to kill you at the same time. We can't afford that." Then he pulled his hand away quickly, with a faintly embarrassed expression and propped it against a hip.

Megatron raised an optic ridge. "I'll have to make sure I win, then," he said.

"You arrogant—" started Prowl, then obviously caught the teasing note in Megatron's voice and huffed out a vent. "No wonder Jazz likes you," he muttered. "It's still a terrible plan."

"I didn't say it was good," said Megatron. "And I have had a lot of practice. Mostly with Arcee."

That did give Prowl pause. Arcee didn't go easy on anyone. "Fine. Go talk to her after we're done here." He shoved a datapad under Megatron's nose. "Read this, approve it, and we can send it to the council for ratification."

Megatron took the datapad; the latest draft of a law to abolish construction debt. It wasn't what he wished it was—he'd wanted to abolish it effective immediately, but the council (the replacement for the Senate that Starscream had offlined) had refused, demanding something less extreme. This would phase it out, forgiving the debts of anyone with more than 75% of the debt paid, capping the total of debts at an additional 25% of the original construction costs, and requiring every company to either forgive their employees' debts or submit their finances for an audit.

Minimus had volunteered for that audit, with as close to a grin as Megatron had ever seen on the mech's face. Forgiving debts, in the face of that smile, was definitely the wiser option.

He'd finally read the documents regarding his own construction, and while he'd been expensive to construct, he'd already paid off the debt twice over by the time he'd been enrolled in the medical academy. He'd still had thousands of years of labor before he'd finished—medical, energon, 'use of space and equipment' and interest. It'd been specially designed so he never *would* finish paying it.

No one else was getting caught in that trap.

"If you're dead," Prowl pointed out, icily, "that's not going to get passed. Don't be an idiot, Megatron."

"Remaining alive is my preference as well," said Megatron.

Prowl gave him a dubious look and apparently elected to ignore that.

Tarn, it turned out, was good company. He had no inclination to talk about his past, but then again, most Decepticons didn't talk about their pasts, either.

And he wanted to talk to Optimus about Megatron. He'd read the mech's writings. He'd admired him.

And so Optimus was the one who had to tell him what Megatron had done. That the mech whose writings Tarn had so admired had abandoned them all. Decided they weren't good enough, and gone with the privileged pedelickers who'd spun him a convincing enough sob story.

He felt almost badly for doing it, with the way that Tarn looked down into his ration for a long time after that, silent, and felt like he needed to say something to make it at least a little less grim.

"The thing that gives me hope, that keeps me in this war is an idea," he said. "The same idea that made the *foulness* of the old Senate inescapable. And that idea is this: Every sentient being deserves an opportunity for redemption. Even Megatron." He met Tarn's optics; they were dull and sad and the mech glanced away. "You knew him from his writings before he got the Matrix, didn't you. When he was an idealist. A true revolutionary, before he became corrupted by hatred and cruelty, before he began styling himself as the true Prime of Cybertron, the true leader of our species. I did, too. And I believe—I have to be able to believe—that it means there is a core of good in him. That he can be persuaded to turn aside from destruction and anger, and come back to us."

His own gaze became distant and sad at that. "I knew him when he was an assistant in Ratchet's clinic. He was a good mech. Compassionate, quiet, kind. He's nothing like that now. But we have to believe that even he can be brought back to us. That even he can see the folly of standing against us. He laid the groundwork for us, back when he meant what he said about who we were and who he was. We can, at least, make that come to fruition."

Tarn watched him closely. Optimus wished he could detect anything in the other mech's expression. Eagerness? Anger? There was nothing.

"Yes," said Tarn at last. "We should bring him back. One day. In a better world." And then he finished his energon, nodded courteously to Optimus, and was gone.

When Optimus saw him next, he was wearing a mask in the shape of the Decepticon badge.

Whatever he'd said, it must have been the right thing to say. He hoped it brought Tarn some measure of comfort, as it did him. He wanted to believe that Megatron could be brought back. Redeemed. He wanted Megatron back. Megatron. Not the cursing madmech he and Starscream had had to restrain, but *Megatron*, the mech he'd known before the war. The one with that gentle, oh-so-sweet smile. The mech whose passion was healing, not warfare. Not the fell, terrible mech who had stalked the ruins he'd made of the refugee camp, with the deluded, radicalized civilians he'd deceived herded before him. Optimus had seen evil in Megatron's optics that day, and profound cowardice as well, and he could only hope that one day, both would be excised.

He fantasized about it too. Megatron returning to him, sorrowful and contrite. Megatron shaking Starscream's hand, admitting that he had misjudged the mech. Megatron talking to a patient, reassuring and friendly. Megatron working once more on a mech, healing rather than hurting. Rebuilding their society together, with Megatron at his side.

More selfish things, too, when he had the privacy.

As he did now.

He imagined Megatron spread out on his berth, looking up at him with eager anticipation and the slight shyness he'd always shown about interface, the back of a fist pressed to his mouth. Shifting his legs a little more open, sliding his panels aside.

Optimus imagined going to him and taking his thighs in hand, pressing them open to fully expose the neat little valve there, soft metalmesh twitching in interest, anterior node pulsing. The smell of lubricant. Maybe Megatron had been fingering himself to get ready. He imagined sliding his own fingers in, hearing the little hitch in Megatron's vents, feeling the intensity of his optics as he stretched him open, just enough to see the dim glow of the biolights deep inside him. He imagined the fluttering of Megatron's valve on his fingers, feeling as he slipped in past the tight outer calipers, fingers embraced by soft, rippling walls, the ridges of sensors and articulations. The noises Megatron would make as he stroked, pressed, twisted. Megatron coming helpless and undone around him, squirming and sobbing and unashamed.

Optimus's hand sped on his spike. He imagined pushing into that tight wet heat, the silken clench around him, sheathing himself deep and firm as Megatron writhed and cried out with it under him. He imagined the visceral pleasure of pounding into the other mech, no quarter given, hard and fast with his own overload his only concern and watching Megatron love every moment of it, whimpering and gasping and bucking against him in a silent plea, overloading again and hard with his optics flaring. Using Megatron like a fragtoy and knowing Megatron adored it, feel how much he liked it, valve quickly sloppy, vents hitching as he was pushed to the edge again and again. The feeling of grinding his spike against the apex of Megatron's valve, claiming him completely and utterly.

"I'm sorry," Optimus imagined Megatron saying, panting over and over as his body bowed up, welcoming his spike, tight valve wet and fluttering around his spike. Desperate for this. Desperate for him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left."

Prowl was not happy. Megatron should know better. Yet, here they were, waiting for a duel. Not that Megatron had had much choice in fighting it, Star Saber had made sure of that much. But it was still stupid.

"And how experienced is he with a sword?" asked Prowl.

"Not very," said Arcee, unconcerned. Prowl frowned at her. She didn't seem to notice; just smiled at the dueling ground in front of them and Megatron and Star Saber facing off. "I'm not worried. I told him to follow his instincts."

Prowl's frown deepened. "Star Saber is an experienced warrior," he told Arcee. "Megatron has little to no experience of his own, and none in duels. We cannot afford to lose him."

"He's built like a tank. He is a tank," she pointed out. "He survived that Functionist sniper. I'm not concerned."

"You're being careless," said Prowl. "All his skill is from the Matrix, and you yourself said that's more of a curse than a blessing."

Arcee stopped responding. They watched as both mecha bowed to one another, Star Saber immediately settling into a utilitarian guard. He said nothing, eyeing Megatron with the intent of a mech ready to do a necessary and unpleasant job.

Prowl kept his doorwings under control with an effort of will. Star Saber was going to kill Megatron. That was who he was—a mech who killed for a living, and Megatron was just one more

job. Only, a job he was taking on voluntarily. Because he wanted to.

And Megatron was a medic. One that could take a beating, certainly. But it wasn't like Star Saber hadn't fought people like him again.

Megatron stood there, holding his sword uncertainly, even more uncertainly than his usual, and didn't move. He didn't seem scared. He didn't seem anything, actually, and Prowl didn't like it. Megatron was quick efficient motion and very occasionally tightly controlled waiting. It was the stillness of a coiling spring, though, and the longer Megatron just *stood there*, the more worried Prowl became. He would surely do something rash, explosive, in proportion to his hesitance.

Arcee seemed completely unworried.

Star Saber didn't like it either. He moved one step in, testing Megatron's defense.

Megatron stayed where he was.

"There's no honor to dueling a mech frozen with terror," said Star Saber.

Megatron cocked an optic ridge and stayed where he was. It was a clumsy way of holding his blade; he wasn't quite gripping it right, Prowl thought, a double-handed hold down by his left hip. But Arcee wasn't making faces over it, and Prowl could see why after a time. The blade slanted up across Megatron's chest, left to right. There was no fatal attack that could be made without first coaxing Megatron to move that sword.

And anything to break his guard would have to be telegraphed.

It was clever. "Did you teach him that?" he asked Arcee.

"It's a good ploy for a novice," she said dismissively. "If his nerve holds."

His nerve would hold. But Star Saber didn't know that.

Star Saber closed with Megatron, and his blade moved, winding under and pressing the length near the hilt, the strongest part of the blade, against the far weaker tip of Megatron's and shoving it up and out of the way. Prowl's doorwings shuddered with alarm, seeing the way it exposed Megatron's entire chest and sides with nothing between them and the blade. All Star Saber would need to do was break the lock and bring his sword down...

Megatron shoved forward in the same motion, closing tightly with Star Saber and sliding his sword forward, strong against strong. He bared his dentae up into Star Saber's masked face, rumbling a snarl.

His leg moved. Instead of leaning further in, he leaned back. And that leg slammed upwards into Star Saber's interface array.

The armor there was protective; it was why a bot Megatron's size could take a kick there from someone Bumblebee's size and keep fighting. But Megatron was big and dense, and he'd turned his frame into a lever with his hip and other leg a fulcrum. So the kick that slammed into Star Saber's panels wasn't just with the simple force Megatron's mechanisms could generate; it was with the weight of his backwards-thrown chest and shoulders propelling it upward. Prowl saw the panel dent. There is only so much armor will do, and the force of this kick drove the protective structures into the very same sensitive metalmesh they were supposed to protect.

"*HUrrRK!*" said Star Saber, and *folded*. Long training alone was probably the reason he kept the

sword in his hands. Megatron ducked the blade as Star Saber pulled it tight to his chest in automatic defense, and darted back.

The crowd gasped in horror and scandalized delight. Megatron's blade flicked out, drawing a line across the other mech's cheekguard. He retreated prudently further and then grinned. "First blood," he told the appalled crowd.

"See?" said Arcee, as if they hadn't watched a violation of dueling etiquette so flagrant no one had bothered making rules to prevent it, "No reason to worry."

"No more duels," said Ratchet, as if it were original and he weren't the fifth person today to tell Megatron no more duels.

"It was the best option under the circumstances," said Mirage, who'd privately confided to Megatron that Hound wouldn't have stood a chance had he dueled Star Saber himself. Star Saber, for his part, had been more insulted than actually injured. But however underhanded his techniques, Megatron had drawn first blood. The matter was settled.

Any complaints about etiquette assumed that a mech who sought to *force* another into a bonding through strength of arms deserved to be dueled properly.

Mirage's relief, like he'd shed the last bits of his fear in returning to Iacon, was reward enough by itself. As was Hound's, who'd spent the last few days carefully approaching Megatron with ways he'd like to help with the new influxes of refugees looking for safety.

And refugees there were. Escapees, more accurately. Optimus's brave new world wasn't a livable one—or even a survivable one—for many mecha. It wasn't just the people in the higher castes. Indeed, anyone who'd been in the military or the engineering castes were fine, and the Decepticons were either murdering or adopting the administrators in the cities they were conquering. But there were others—miners, who distrusted an enforcer running a movement, industrial, civilian frames who chafed under the repeated snubs from military mecha. The people who desperately didn't want to fight. The people who stood up to a Decepticon at the wrong time and suffered for it.

Rodimus sweet-talked some noble house out of a few transports without authorization from anyone and started his rescue missions again. Megatron later found out the mech had started an affair with that household's heir into the bargain, and was torn between admonishing him and admiring.

They weren't the only city seeing refugees. Praxus was bearing some of that brunt, and Megatron wasn't sure if it was the practicality of caring for them or their stories that proved the greatest pressure, but the Praxians opened negotiations less than a month after he'd been confirmed as Prime. They had little use for the religious implications of his position, but rather saw that confirmation as a sign of political stability.

Prowl handled most of the negotiations, drawing on Tyrest and Dominus's expertise to hammer out the terms, and pulling in a few other mecha to finalize defense agreements. One of those other mecha was also Megatron's new strategy tutor, who Megatron wasn't sure what to think of.

"Hello," the mech had said at their meeting, "Megatron Prime? It's an honor. My name is Thunderclash, head of Iacon's defense force."

Thunderclash had a list of achievements longer than he was tall (he was very tall), a paint job that scorched the optics, and everyone liked him.

Every. One.

Ratchet reminisced happily about medical school with him. Prowl and Jazz got along with him. He could debate philosophy with Dominus. Pit, even the Matrix liked him, pulsing warm approval at Megatron. Arcee didn't hate him.

Rodimus was the sole exception, but he couldn't conjure up any good reason to do so, finally snarling, "He's too perfect!" and charging off on another mission.

He was worryingly perfect. Worryingly competent. Megatron wanted to be suspicious, but, to his horror, also found himself liking Thunderclash. He didn't approve, but the mech *was* a good teacher.

"No, you're a good student," Thunderclash returned, as soon as he offered the compliment. "Ratchet thinks so as well, and he's right."

Stating that Ratchet was right was a disturbingly effective way to get Megatron to think a little better about another mech. It worked, he knew it had worked, and he was embarrassed that it had worked.

He went with it, in the end.

Negotiations continued. The Decepticons dug in. The Autobots shored up Iacon's defense grid. They sent some delegates to Praxus—Bluestreak and a few of the other Praxians. Lodgings in Praxus were difficult to come by because of the refugees, but Bluestreak managed to negotiate them a place to stay in the training academy he'd attended when he'd been a newspark. Apparently his instructors still thought well of him.

Refugees continued to arrive, some from Praxus, some from other places. Megatron began feeling like they had a chance. It might come to war still, but the Autobots and Decepticons might be fairly evenly matched. Tyger Pax was seeming tentatively interested, and Protihex had already sent its first delegate. Hopefully, Optimus would see the folly in pressing the offensive; the Autobots could now fight back.

Three months after his ascension, they signed the treaty with Praxus—the first member of the Autobot Alliance. Megatron could see the relief in Prowl's doorwings. Prowl was even smiling for most of the rest of the night, a small reserved expression, but one Megatron was glad to see.

Jazz was, too. He paused by Megatron as they watched Prowl talking with the Praxian delegation, and sighed happily. "It's good to see him like this," he said. "It's so rare to see him like this. Even before the war!"

Jazz was still referring to it as the war. Megatron sighed, a much less happy noise. "I hope this will discourage Optimus from any actual hostilities," he said. "Convince him that any actual hostilities will be so destructive as to be pointless. I doubt even he will risk the survival of our species on his pride. If he wishes to rule Kaon and its allied cities, so be it."

"It's Starscream I worry about," said Jazz. "But Optimus's stick-in-the-mud attitude will help us there. He seems to favor inaction over action. Maybe you're right. We'd still better prepare."

Megatron nodded, and the tides of the celebration swept them apart once more. He actually enjoyed himself for once; it was a real accomplishment, a professional gathering rather than an ostentatious one, and the fuel was good. No one was sneering at him. The relief in the air was palpable.

He retired far later than usual, read a little before recharge, and settled down with his own

satisfaction humming a counterpart to the Matrix's contentment. For the first time, it didn't seem like such a burden.

In the very early morning, he jerked awake. He didn't realize why, not at first, and then he smelled smoke. A sensor ghost, he realized in the same instant he felt the concussion of an explosion. His habsuite remained calm and placid around him.

Pain licked his plating, the echoes of a raging inferno thousands of miles away. There were screams. Megatron doubled over on the recharge slab, reminding himself of where he was. That this was the Matrix. Not him. His vision flickered, showing him horror. He stared at the recharge slab, shoving the images back as much as he could, listening to his own rough vents and the hum of the environmental systems of the building. That it was his hand pressing dents into the cool metal. That he wasn't burning.

His spark hurt. His vents roughened. His hand clutched over his chestplates, as if that would protect him.

"Enough," he told the Matrix, as it tried to channel all the fear and pain of the dying into him, and for a moment he allowed his optical feed to flicker, to show him the skyline the visiting Praxians had shown him, proudly, a day ago now broken and wreathed in fire, Seeker engines screaming high above. His vents hiccuped at it, and he was briefly unsure whether it was his horror or that of the Matrix that swamped him.

He pushed at it, making it clear what he needed to do, that he was listening and he was acting and the sensations faded, his spark dulling into an ache more of grief than actual pain. He swung his legs off the slab.

He left his room in a daze, knocked at Prowl's door and found him absent, headed down to the conference room they now styled a command center. Prowl and a few others were still there, discussing the next treaty as someone monitored news broadcasts.

The broadcast was still of the negotiations earlier in the day. Megatron paused in the door, staring at them all. Dreading shattering the peace, even though there was no choice.

With what the Matrix was showing him, with the sheer scale of the devastation already, he was never going to see Prowl so happy again.

What they were doing—that wasn't how you conquered a city for later use. That was how you wiped it from the map.

"Prowl," he said harshly. Prowl's head jerked up; he'd almost fallen into recharge right there.

Megatron vented, seeing Prowl's expression turn to concern. "The Decepticons are attacking Praxus."

He saw the consternation on the mech's face, the pause as he processed, the question forming—*how do you know?*—the glance at the placid news broadcast.

And the communications array in the conference room screamed to life, trilling its high-urgency call from defense headquarters, a counterpart to the steady beat of explosions that the Matrix fed into Megatron's spark.

Praxus was too far away. They could send all the people they wanted; all they'd be good for was cleanup.

There was nothing to do. There was nothing that *could* be done.

Prowl met his optics, shock before the grief or guilt had caught hold, before even the anger. Maybe he hadn't realized, yet, that this wasn't a conquest; it was eradication. That Praxus hadn't had a chance to fight back. Not enough of one to save them. That the ghost-sense of what was going on told Megatron there was no way out of the city. That the Autobots had no airborne armaments to face Starscream and his Seekers. That ground transport would be too slow.

Optimus had attacked. Optimus was seeking a war. And he didn't care about what had to be done in order to win it. How many civilians died. Indeed, he was hoping sheer brutality would bring it to a swifter end. That in order to send the message he wanted to—do not ally with the Autobots, or you will die—Praxus had to be utterly destroyed.

Praxus, and all its people.

"I'm sorry," said Megatron softly, to a mech who still didn't, couldn't know how mortally he was wounded, and the communications screen filled with flames and Thunderclash's horrified voice, trembling as he reported what, exactly, the Decepticons had done.

Chapter 82

"I don't care," Megatron told Prowl later that day. "You're not going with the delegation. You're going with the relief effort. The relief effort with an *armed escort*."

Prowl stared at him in flat anger. "I'm more qualified than you are to make that call."

"You're more compromised than I am. You're not leaving today. I'm not losing my senior strategist just after losing one of our major allies."

Prowl stalked toward him, doorwings quivering and flattened behind him. "Do you know how many people are going to die in the next day?" he spat. "Our allies? Our people? Don't forget Bluestreak and *our* delegation."

"I haven't," said Megatron. "But you arriving a day later is going to make less difference than you not arriving at all."

Prowl made an abortive gesture of rage.

"I don't trust Starscream not to bomb anything on the roads to Praxus right now," said Megatron, more gently. "I know you want to get there as soon as possible. I know I was unsuccessful in persuading the ambassador to wait to return with our relief force. I think they've made a serious mistake. I will not lose you to the same error."

"You have no idea what you're—"

"Let me put it this way," said Megatron, the gentleness gone from his voice. "You may either assist me in coordinating our relief effort, so it gets there faster, or I can lock you in your quarters." Prowl drew in a quick vent to retort, and Megatron raised a hand. "And if you were to get any clever ideas into your processor, such as escaping said quarters, Ratchet, Jazz and I would have to have a discussion whether your obviously extreme emotional distress—extreme enough to cause you to undertake such an obviously *severely* irrational course of action—warranted medical sedation."

Prowl's optics went wide. "You wouldn't."

"We've lost enough good mecha today," Megatron said. "I'm not adding you to that list."

With that, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

He let out a long vent, staring at the opposite wall. The grief from the Matrix had settled into a steady ache. No one had slept since he'd staggered into the command center, and Megatron, at least, didn't have any plans *to* sleep in the near future. They had to act, and act fast, before Praxus's destruction sent exactly the message the Decepticons meant it to: that supporting the Autobot government in Iacon meant death. That meant a relief effort to Praxus. And it meant military retaliation.

Megatron wanted Prowl in charge of the first. He wanted Prowl's input on the second. It was his home city in ashes.

He considered, briefly, how he would feel if it were his own home bombed flat, if Tarn had been razed to the ground instead of Praxus. Tarn was, of course, under Decepticon control—but what if Starscream and Optimus had set out specifically to eradicate everyone like him? Praxus

was so distinct; their builders had settled on a very particular model eons ago, had built specifically to it since. There were sub-specializations, of course, but their frames were famous for their efficiency, the sensitivity of their sensors, and a basic processor that was both excellent at analysis of large quantities of data, and immensely adaptable. Praxus had been a long-term holdout from Functionist doctrine, largely because there hadn't been a huge diversity of frametypes there. Some labor-caste people had arrived later on, but it wasn't a city friendly to foreigners, so there weren't many of them. If everyone was similarly framed, it made little sense to assign jobs based on frametype.

Outside Praxus, expatriates like Prowl had been firmly shuffled into a handful of careers—law, but not ranked too highly, the military, but not ranked too highly, medicine, accountancy. They were clerks and officers, but never directors nor generals, a whole group of people going about their work in quietly efficient ways, reliable and taken for granted at the same time.

The Praxian build standard was jealously guarded. Mecha like Jazz, custom-sparked for a noble house, weren't uncommon, with many design elements consciously mimicked for a Praxian 'look'. But not too many—Praxus had literally patented their way of making people, and was more than happy to enforce it in the courts. Yet elements had crept in, almost universally. Most medics wore chevrons that resembled the Praxian design, for example. (Ratchet had offered Megatron one, some time ago, and Megatron had snorted and asked him where the frag could he put it, so it wouldn't look stupid—Ratchet had not had a response to that).

And now the entire city was gone.

The Autobots weren't even getting *reports*. Very likely because there was no one left there in any position to send reports.

The grieving of the Matrix within his chest made Megatron wonder if there was anyone left there at all.

Prowl would not join the city of the burned and the dead.

Within the room, there was a snarl of rage and the sound of many objects falling and breaking, then a bigger crash. Megatron's best guess was that Prowl had overturned his desk. He stayed where he was; he'd rather Prowl take out his frustrations on the furniture than in running off with the Praxian delegation, or on himself.

A few moments later, Prowl emerged. "Where's the staging area for this relief effort?"

"This way," said Megatron, and led him there. He endured Prowl's jibes and snarls about incompetence and let him arrange it to his liking, and partway through when Bumblebee ran in with the news that the Praxian delegation had indeed been ambushed on the road and was dead with the exception of a single survivor, he avoided Prowl's gaze, knowing anything he did or said would be taken as adding insult to injury.

"Thank you," said Jazz much later, putting a hand on his arm.

Megatron looked down at him, saw the smaller mech's fear. He cautiously patted the hand. "We'll keep him online," he said, because it was really the only thing he could promise.

A tense and torqued off Megatron was strictly forbidden from participating in the initial relief operation, because putting the Prime and his second in command in harm's way was insane. Once the city was stabilized and defended, he'd be able to go. In the meantime, the kid buried

himself in work, helping Thunderclash work out military responses.

Ratchet wasn't about to go sticking his nose into that. He, too, was torqued off. He'd wanted to participate in the relief operation and Megatron had put his foot down—*hard*.

"We're not losing you," he'd snapped. "We're not risking losing you. You know what happened to the delegation."

Yeah, Ratchet knew. He'd glanced over at the stasis tank where Smokescreen floated then, and Megatron looked, too.

"If I have to sit here, so do you," he'd added.

"With my thumb up my exhaust and my mind in neutral," Ratchet grouched. But he'd obeyed all the same. After all, they needed somewhere to send the inevitable casualties.

No Praxian casualties arrived. Even though Iacon had airlift capabilities—a number of both military and civilian shuttles were available—no one was airlifted back.

A few days later, Prowl declared the rescue operation over, the recovery phase begun, and the defenses well enough established for Megatron to visit. What had happened there was still in question; little enough news had arrived, and Megatron wasn't talking about what he'd seen, if anything.

But he brought Ratchet with him.

"We won't worry about the Decepticons for now," he told Ratchet. "It's as if they wanted us to see this."

They climbed aboard a short-range atmospheric shuttle. Ratchet's fuel tank dropped. He *loathed* flying. Pharma had consistently mocked him for it, of course, but he'd never told Megatron.

He wondered, briefly, if Pharma had been at all involved with Praxus. Surely he hadn't fallen that far. Surely his oaths still mattered to him.

He remembered Pharma's uncaring hands on him and shuddered. He didn't know anymore.

Megatron sat down in one of the seats. Ratchet hesitated, then sat next to him, wishing he could magnetize his aft into place. He grasped the armrests instead.

Megatron, bless him, pretended not to notice.

The shuttle took off. Ratchet's death grip on the arm rests intensified. He tried not to look out the window. A glance at Megatron showed him stiff but not openly disturbed.

Ratchet focused on venting slowly and looking just as unruffled as Megatron did. He'd managed to retain some sort of calm—I *am perfectly all right defying the law of gravity, even if I'm as aerodynamic as a brick and will go splat as surely as any organic at this height*—when the turbulence started.

The first few bumps weren't so bad, a side to side shaking not unlike a ground transport. But the first time they hit an air pocket, Ratchet's composure shattered. The shuttle bumped upward, hard, and Ratchet hissed a sharp breath in through his dentae and grabbed the armrests hard enough to put dents in them, squeezing his optics shut as he waited for the drop he was sure

would follow.

After a moment, when none did, he dared to open an optic.

Megatron was looking at him.

Ratchet flushed hot with embarrassment. He looked away.

"You do realize miners don't spend a lot of time flying," said Megatron.

Ratchet gave him a withering look. "Don't tell me *you're* scared."

"No," said Megatron. "But I can't say I'm happy." The shuttle swooped, and Ratchet grabbed the armrests for dear life again.

"It's Impactor who's scared," Megatron went on. "He actually spends the whole time praying, if you can believe it. He's as much of an atheist as you are, except when he's in the air. You should hear him when we're entering orbit."

"So I take it you probably make fun of him for this?" said Ratchet through gritted dentae.

"No, because he's not scared enough not to punch me for it," said Megatron. He gave Ratchet a crooked smile. "It takes his mind off it. But I'm not that self-sacrificing."

The kid was trying to be comforting. Primus. Ratchet managed a small chuckle.

The problem was, the kid had succeeded at being comforting. He was actually really good at it.

Ratchet had used to be able to comfort him. He was glad Megatron had recovered. But it made him feel his own injury, his own pain about Pharma, more acutely with their roles switched like this. Rung would probably say Ratchet needed to talk about Pharma with someone, a friend at least. But that feeling of shame, of being the one needing help, wouldn't abate. He wanted to continue being solid and reliable for Megatron. He didn't want the kid worrying about him. He felt his failures in that acutely already.

Thing was, the kid was also his Prime. And for all that the Prime had been a political position for as long as anyone could remember, culturally, there was a sort of an expectation that they'd be comforting. And that was even without the complication of that bauble in Megatron's chest, which definitely did *something*, even if it pretty definitely wasn't a direct connection to Primus.

They were descending. Ratchet looked out the window and gulped.

Plumes of smoke rose here and there, but most of the fires were out. What was left was slagged metal and toppled buildings, a wall standing here and there, windows like empty eyes. A few buildings still stood, and he was relieved to see that until passing close to one on the final descent to the landing pad he actually saw the inside; floors gone entirely, everything soot-blackened. Nothing to indicate that this had been a city of millions earlier in the week.

Megatron was looking, his head turned away from Ratchet and his shoulders hunched.

"Why didn't we see any casualties?" Ratchet murmured.

Megatron just looked at him, sad, flat. "There weren't any that made it," he said, just as

quietly. "Prowl's teams found one survivor."

"How's that even possible?"

Megatron's shoulders hunched. "Sometimes, luck is simply obscene."

Ratchet looked down at his fingers. "That's three surviving Praxians with the Autobots. *Three.*"

"A sum very close to the number of Praxians on Cybertron," said Megatron. "Jazz's people are reporting in. It sounds like the Decepticons purged their own ranks of Praxians at the same time. We've got one report of someone who survived—apparently his loyalties were unquestionable, whatever that means. But it's arrests and executions otherwise."

Ratchet stared out at the gray, flat landscape. "This isn't just the opening of a war," he said slowly. "It's *genocide*."

"Yes," said Megatron. "Optimus—and most likely Starscream—wants us absolutely sure on where we stand. We are vermin to be exterminated."

He drew a rough breath and stood. Ratchet followed suit before the kid could offer him a hand. Something in him shuddered, that mecha could hate this completely, that he was marked for death at this very moment by mecha he'd considered patients, comrades if nothing more, by *Optimus*, damn him, because of who he'd chosen to follow. Because he hadn't wanted to step aside from the idealistic young mech who'd promised a better future for all of them, and then, when push came to shove, stood by the *all of them*.

"Just like the Functionists," Megatron said. "As soon as you step aside from the path they've dictated to you, you're an enemy. And must be controlled by any means necessary. Or eradicated."

He stared at the opening door of the shuttle a long moment, drawn and grim, and for a moment Ratchet had difficulty thinking of him as *kid*. He looked so much older, shoulders tight under an immense, invisible weight.

"That's our choice," he said softly. "Total cooperation. Or total destruction."

Chapter 83

"This just gets worse and worse," said Starscream, shuffling through the notes they'd managed to assemble on the Autobot treaty with Praxus. "It looks like they expected to mobilize the whole city. Makes sense, really, given the uniformity of Praxian frametypes."

Optimus ran a hand over his face. "It still pains me to destroy an entire city."

"It wasn't a city," said Starscream. "It was a fortress. An unprepared one, fortunately for us. But Megatron was planning to enter the war in no uncertain way."

"And we had traitors in our own ranks," said Tarn. Starscream frowned across the table at him. How Tarn had gotten into the meeting was a mystery to him. Optimus seemed to like him. But Optimus's last pet had been Megatron, and Starscream was damned if he'd let the stupid fragger repeat *that* mistake. "With the exception of the individual who gave us the codes to the city's defense grid, we could trust none of them."

Optimus sighed heavily. "And because of their folly, Cybertron has lost something—something that's never coming back."

"They weren't too friendly to foreigners," Starscream pointed out. "We don't have time to waste. While our destruction of Praxus made the price of supporting Megatron and his army of backsliding entitled brats clear, they'll be planning a counteroffensive to prove they can protect their allies now they have warning."

"I concur with Starscream," said Tarn. Starscream glared at him. Since when did his opinion matter? "Megatron's drive to protect people he considers his borders on the pathological. And he's not the forgiving type." He looked blandly back at Starscream, as if he hadn't just revealed a greater knowledge of their enemy than was entirely healthy to confess.

"I know," said Optimus. He sighed, heavily. "Though our hands have been forced, we cannot fail to acknowledge the gravity of what we did here." He stood, reached to put a hand on Starscream's shoulder, and Starscream felt his spark lift with a delight he didn't want to admit to. "However terrible a thing it was, Starscream, you and your Seekers did it very well. You've rewarded them appropriately? We have the energon for double rations."

Yes, and that was why half of Starscream's air force was currently drunk out of its mind. "Already done."

"Good. It was ugly work."

The Praxians were enemies. They'd signed themselves over to a Prime, a mech who'd crawled out of the muck with no more distinction than a bauble in his chest. They didn't deserve mercy or an acknowledgement of their deaths. Nevertheless, Starscream bobbed his helm in acknowledgement and watched Optimus leave the room, Soundwave close behind him.

"He has a gentle spark," said Tarn, behind him. "I'm glad he can do what needs to be done."

Starscream's lip curled. "He most certainly can," he said, grudgingly. He didn't want to acknowledge Optimus's abilities; he wanted to lead this army, one day, unfettered by the mech's moralizing. But Optimus could lead, and people loved him, so he had to grit his dentae and bear it.

And he wasn't about to put up with this fragger's superiority about their leader.

"So it would seem," said Tarn, thoughtfully.

"High words from a new recruit who seems to know Megatron... intimately."

Tarn paused in the act of rising and shrugged a shoulder. "My past is my own business. All you need know is that I hate the Functionists, and every remaining scrap of their ideology. Both must be eradicated, down to the last filing. You and Lord Optimus are working toward that aim; accordingly, I am yours, spark and frame."

Starscream watched him out of the room, optics narrowed. No, he did not like the mech. But he'd dealt with Megatron, and Tarn, for all his airs, was no Megatron.

Prowl had spent a whole day at Bluestreak's bedside; the other mech wouldn't stop clinging to him, curled around his arm and then, when he moved to sit on the bed, around his back and waist. The second position was better. It left both Prowl's arms free for work while the other, younger mech stared blankly past him and shuddered.

He wouldn't have put up with it, normally. He would have referred Bluestreak to Rung and moved on with his work. But he and Bluestreak and Smokescreen were all that were left, to his knowledge. If there were Praxians offworld, they weren't coming back and they most certainly weren't reaching out to the Autobots, the alliance that had brought this vicious destruction down on them. Maybe, when the war ended...

He put up with Bluestreak's clinging. And later on, he went down to visit Bluestreak when he could. There were only the three of them, and Smokescreen was still in stasis.

He felt empty. He felt as if he were simply going through the motions. That he was piloting a body completely disconnected from mind or emotion. He supposed it was better than the alternative.

He was working on a report, Bluestreak staring blankly past him, when Megatron arrived. There was a sort of satisfaction to knowing the other mech had been forced to wait as well. It was only right, after his orders had kept Prowl in Iacon while his people *died*.

The cold logical part of Prowl's brain, the part that never turned off, knew perfectly well that Megatron had been right. That in refusing to allow Prowl back without an armed escort, he'd saved Prowl's life.

For once, Prowl didn't feel like listening to that part of his brain. He wanted to be angry. And it was easy to be angry at Megatron.

And then Megatron actually walked into the room, and Prowl suddenly found it not so easy to be angry at him. Because it was hard to be angry at a mech who was also so obviously outraged and grieving, a tight controlled rage blazing behind his optics.

Megatron had done the most sensible thing, Prowl's brain reminded him. And right now, it seemed it had hurt him almost as badly as it had Prowl. Prowl considered him, briefly, and concluded it had to be the Matrix. It had dragged him through the deaths of the Senate. It had woken him as the attack on Praxus began. It had been Megatron who had warned them, after all. Perhaps Megatron had experienced the death of Praxus as he had the Senate.

It was harder to be angry at him. But Prowl was still angry at him. Because Bluestreak had spent days, a week under that rubble, dying. Because Bluestreak was *the only one that they'd saved*.

"Anything to report?" Megatron asked, and sat opposite Prowl, meeting his optics with a steely gaze.

"No more than my last," said Prowl.

Megatron looked past him at Bluestreak. Bluestreak's optics focused for the first time that day, and he pushed himself up stiffly and asked the question Prowl had hoped he would ask. "Why did you take so long?"

Megatron's mouth thinned. "Starscream's air force bombed everyone on the roads in a 100 kilometer radius from the city, and they kept it up for the next four days. There was no way in, short of using an orbit-capable shuttle. I wanted to be sure that I was launching a rescue operation, not adding bodies to the count."

Bluestreak stared at him a few moments longer, then sat up the rest of the way. "I'm going to kill Optimus. And Starscream," he said evenly. "Both of them. I lay in that rubble for seven days and I heard them die around me. My old friends, my mentors. And no one came."

"And Starscream made sure no one could come," said Megatron, softly. "We will make them pay, Bluestreak, I promise you that."

Bluestreak stared at him. "Will it be enough?"

"No," said Megatron. "But it will be something, and as things are, we will take what we can get."

He turned his attention to Prowl. "Prowl. Have we concluded operations here?"

"Other than constructing an outpost," Prowl hated to say it aloud, hated turning his home into just—a footnote of horror, an outpost built on the struts of the dead—but he knew the necessity, and he could see the anger in Megatron's face, too, and took a little comfort in that, "yes. What is it?"

Megatron handed him a datapad. "Plans for the invasion of Vos."

Prowl blinked at him in shock. "Vos?"

"Heavily defended. Well behind enemy lines. And Starscream's home," said Megatron, vicious. "Jazz has established connections with some of the crime syndicates. They're about as happy with the Decepticons as we are. If we take it, even if we just severely damage the military infrastructure, it'll be a considerable blow."

Doubtful, Prowl took the datapad. Part of him loved the idea. It was striking back where it would hurt the most. Starscream preened about his home, with an intensity that betrayed his pain over his exile. This would hurt him, deep and personal, and while Prowl wasn't willing to stoop to genocide, the occupation of his home would wound Starscream's pride irreparably. He wanted to make this work.

Megatron looked back at him, *counting* on him to make this work.

Prowl found he wasn't angry at him anymore.

They left Bluestreak to Ratchet, who was there to determine if he could be moved, and went outside to plan at Prowl's insistence. "I want to remember why I'm doing this," Prowl told

Megatron. Megatron nodded. He could understand that.

"I haven't returned here in years," Prowl said, once they were outside. It was hard to tell what he was feeling from that; his voice was steady and even and cool.

"Why?" asked Megatron.

"I was supposed to be someone...very different than I am now," said Prowl. He spoke slowly, staring ahead of himself, but it wasn't the deliberate speech Megatron was used to. It was almost rusty, like Prowl was discussing something very old, worn from neglect rather than use.

Megatron wondered if he was being tested or if he were simply seeing part of Prowl he had no idea existed. If this were stress or calculation.

Prowl certainly favored keeping that in question.

"We had aptitude tests here to determine function," Prowl said. "Theoretically, it was more fair than the Functionist system. I scored well on the exam immediately after I was online, and went to a specialized training program for data analysis in legal fields. They had... high expectations for me there. I was continually top of my cadre. Every year, throughout the program.

"They wanted me on the Council—our ruling body—eventually. Within the first three years of the Academy, my whole function was planned: I would complete the program, I would enter Praxus's Enforcement Division for practical experience, be transferred to a foreign Enforcer service to gain experience there, and to better understand our neighbors, be brought back and put through a legal program and become an Orator, serve in that role for a few centuries, then be elevated as an advisor to a Councilmember and, in time, be nominated as a Councilmember myself. It was all planned—even the legal program I would attend and the Council seat I would eventually inherit, because those were the areas in which I showed aptitude." The corner of Prowl's mouth twisted. "I was supposed to become a very powerful mech," he said, and then laughed a small bitter laugh that had nothing to do with mirth.

"But you didn't return," said Megatron, keeping his voice neutral.

"They sent me to Rodion first, then Tyger Pax, then Polyhex," said Prowl. "An unusual number of postings, but I needed them to gain the experience I was expected to have, and I wanted that experience. I wanted to become that very powerful mech, because they'd given me everything in life I could want, and I had been very lucky, and I knew it, and I wanted to do right by it. I enjoyed the assignments, each in their own ways. I enjoyed learning. And I was, as I was supposed to be, aloof from my colleagues. I was Praxian, so they didn't understand me or esteem me, and moreover, I was in training to play a role none of them would ever understand. And I could not allow myself to become compromised. They didn't care much for me. You know how people regard us.

"But my home was waiting for me. And this was temporary."

They'd been staring out over the shattered landscape as Prowl spoke, even and calm, as if he were making a report on something that didn't matter, like the levels of their paint supplies, or new recruits, or some gaffe among the noble set in Iacon. But Megatron had learned to watch his wings, and they were too still to be calm right now, and Prowl's gaze wasn't fixed in the way it was when he was simply reporting, but glazed, looking at something that wasn't there. That probably hadn't been there for a long time.

Praxus hadn't been waiting for him, and his exile hadn't been temporary, Megatron knew

that without asking further, and something in him tensed in anticipation. He didn't want to hear it, he didn't want this vulnerability from Prowl, he didn't want to *know*, because Prowl telling him was in and of itself wrong, a symptom of the deep, maybe mortal wound the death of Praxus had left in his spark. But Megatron stood there and listened, because just like Prowl, he knew what it was to be someone who couldn't simply follow what he wanted, walk away from the things he couldn't bear, because he had a duty and there were people relying on both of them. Even if the city Prowl had been told he would lead was now ash and shattered bodies.

No wonder Prowl had fought him so about returning.

"In Polyhex, we knew there was a sentient-trafficking ring. It had proven extremely difficult to break for all the usual reasons—bribes, intimidation, a large amount of money. Victims were either dead, offworld, or deeply unwilling to talk; most of the buyers seemed to be organics."

There were few comfortable purposes organics would put a Cybertronian slave to, Megatron was well aware of that. Cybertronians were often more robust than organic species, and the organic species who traded in them made that a central marketing point.

"It had gone on so long that the pervasive attitude on the part of the citizenry was that it was horrible, but no one cared enough about them to stop it, and they'd just do their best to keep themselves and their friends safe, because what else could they do? And they weren't wrong; I was afraid that, even if I worked on the case the rest of my time there, no one would speak with me and the ring would still be there, doing just as well as ever. Until a mech walked into my office and told me he knew how to break them for good.

"I...wasn't particularly taken with him at that point. My colleagues tended to keep their derision to when and where they thought I couldn't overhear, and treated me with at least a degree of respect when they knew I was present. They did not sashay in and perch provocatively on my desk, while making an offer of professional assistance sound like a proposition."

Megatron's brow ridges rose. "I take it the informant was Jazz."

"Yes." A twitch of doorwings: Megatron didn't know how to read that. "He'd just arrived. One of the recent disappearances had been an acquaintance. He'd taken it personally. He'd already found out a surprising amount, though it was several weeks of work before he let me know why he'd been able to do that; he felt that allowing people to know he'd been custom-sparked for a noble house would only make him a target for exactly the sort of people we were trying to stop. Still, even without the support of a noble house and even disguising most of his abilities, a high-end intelligence model like Jazz is...extremely capable. In two months we made more progress than I had in the preceding two years.

"Unfortunately, that progress made us a threat. I had not paid enough attention to the very real possibility that, as we had been trying to destroy the ring, they had been watching us. Laughing, mostly, at my attempts. But with the both of us together, we became a problem they had to address. Knowing Jazz would be helpless without my protection—and that he'd lose the stipend the department allowed me to allot to him for his services, removing his means of survival—they went after me. And I didn't see them coming, because I had, until then, been reasonably well protected. Praxus, while not disclosing my actual importance, had made it clear to the city states hosting me that any significant harm to my person would provoke similarly significant diplomatic consequences.

"The trafficking ring didn't know, or care, about that. They wanted it clear that anyone, no matter who they were, interfering in their business would die. That they could reach *anyone*, and do anything they wanted, and there was nothing the law or any other entity could do about it."

Prowl paused, then shrugged. "It was a very unpleasant experience."

Megatron looked sidelong at him at the understatement.

"They'd discounted Jazz from the beginning. He'd been monitoring both them and me, and he got a rescue mounted soon enough. I escaped with only moderate injury, and we arrested a number of the prominent figures in the organization. We celebrated that evening, sure that cleaning up the remainder of the group would be a simple endeavor.

"The next morning, Jazz failed to appear at the station." Prowl vented, long and controlled. Megatron watched him, suspecting long-held anger in the small gesture. "They didn't care to hide what they'd done—everyone in his housing block knew who'd taken him, and to where. They wanted to make an example of him as well, make sure to scare everyone out of working with the Enforcers. They didn't think anyone would come after them, and it turned out they were right. When I went to my superiors, they refused to assist me in finding him. He was an asset, but not a particularly valuable one. He was gutter trash, in the words of my captain at the time, and if I thought there was going to be a single shainx of taxpayer money expended on his behalf, I was sorely mistaken.

"Arguing for a demonstration that we protected our own only got me laughed at, so I set out to provide that demonstration myself. It...doesn't matter how I did it, or what exactly it was; the gist of it was that I'd spent a certain amount of time going through the files on improvised explosive devices common in Rodion during my time there and was quite proficient at mimicking them, and that the warehouse I knew them to be holding Jazz in was a layout with which I was already familiar. I created a distraction, blocked the exits, and had Jazz out before the building fully ignited. His tormenters, unfortunately, were unable to access our escape route.

Another vent. "He'd been taunting them," he said with a wry turn to his mouth. "They didn't expect him to be rescued. He didn't expect to be rescued. They wanted the consequences for challenging them to be clear and hideous, so they were...taking their time. But he was conscious when I rescued him, and far less damaged than I'd expected; apparently he'd escaped at least once. What matters is, I was successful.

"Jazz was shocked. He said he'd thought I was a decent sort, but still a spoiled noble brat, and that people like him were always disposable to people like me. I had never been called a spoiled brat in my function, at least not to my faceplate, and I had been exhausted enough over the last few days that I laughed at the insult—a response that would have alienated anyone else, I'm sure, but Jazz insists endeared me to him forever.

"It turned out the Captain of our division had been paid off by the ring, and I was able to use the subsequent embarrassment to secure Jazz an official position that was not dependent on my presence or goodwill. When I transferred to Iacon some years later, he arranged his own transfer. Shortly after that we began courting. You know the outcome of that.

"I had not consulted my mentors back home about the courtship, nor informed them; I thought it was none of their business, and that my personal life was personal. When it came time for me to return to Praxus, Jazz applied for a spousal visa so he could accompany me. He was not optimistic about the outcome, and I did not understand why.

"It was declined. And when we appealed it, the official we spoke with gave his reasons; though Jazz had never been *caught*, Praxian Intelligence had discovered a number of criminal activities he'd been involved in. The report was detailed. And concerning—it bespoke a degree of surveillance of my activities and those of my acquaintances that I had been utterly unaware of. Still worse, it was delivered in a way calculated to be maximally humiliating to both of us. The message

was clear: Praxus wanted me back, but Jazz could never join me. They turned Jazz into the barrier between me, and the life I had been trained for since that first exam."

That was all too familiar to Megatron. Now, he knew how a partnership between himself and Terminus would have been viewed, if he'd ever been allowed to simply be a medic. He put a firm, steadying hand on Prowl's shoulder, and Prowl did not shrug it off.

"Jazz was...mostly glad that the litany of crimes he'd been accused of did not change my feelings about him, and I hated them even more for that. But there was still a chance; I contacted my mentors, hoping an exception could be made. I reminded them that Jazz had saved my life. That, whatever work he had done to survive before we met, he had served with distinction and dignity during his time in Iacon.

"One of them called me." Prowl was silent. "His name doesn't matter now. He burned with the rest of them." No indication that he thought this was a good or bad thing. He was silent a moment, staring. "He told me that while they had been happy to give me the freedom they had, that they would have under most circumstances allowed me to bring back a foreign conjunx, provided they had a suitable background, they drew the line at me bringing back a foreign guttermech. That if I'd dissolve the *ritus*, they would find me a suitable partner, and I would be welcome to keep Jazz as a lover—and a lover only. He proposed an arrangement that would have left Jazz in a very similar position as a Towers consort. It was the only way; it was the logical way to deal with the low-caste disposable garbage I seemed inclined to adopt. If he could prove himself capable of good behavior, he might, one day, earn the privileges of a full resident, but in the meantime, they needed to ensure he wouldn't harm actual citizens." Prowl's optics flickered. "I told them to frag off, and cancelled my notice I was retiring from the Iaconian Enforcers. I have not spoken to my mentors since then. I have not been home since then. And now this."

They stared together at the blasted landscape, Megatron's hand on Prowl's shoulder, Prowl stony and grim.

"I was supposed to lead them," said Prowl, softly, after a time, and the stoniness collapsed and he knelt suddenly as if his legs wouldn't hold his weight. "They betrayed me—but I should have been here."

"You would not have prevented this," said Megatron. Prowl looked up at him with a terrible look in his optics, broken and jagged-edged.

"Couldn't I?" he asked quietly. "I would have been the director of city security. You know my capabilities. You know what I can do. There's no point to lying about it between the two of us. *Couldn't I?*"

"We won't know," said Megatron. "Because they did betray you. And you did what you had to to preserve Jazz's wellbeing, his dignity, and his autonomy. That was the right thing to do—and it was not the selfish thing to do, before you go any further with that reasoning."

Prowl looked faintly startled. Then, "I had hoped that they would change their minds, that my skills would be enough in demand I could set my terms. It never happened."

"They found someone else, because they had made their choice," said Megatron. "The mech you had chosen to spend your life with was more important than the safety of their people. If this all hinged upon your presence or absence, which I doubt, their choices did this. Yours did not." He knelt next to Prowl. "Of this, at least, you are innocent, Prowl. I don't think there will be a great deal in the future we can say the same of. Either of us."

Prowl snorted at that, a small grim noise.

"And we should make sure of that," said Megatron. "Vos must burn as well."

Prowl's head came up and he stared fixedly at the ruins. "This was Starscream's plan," he said aloud. "This has his clawmarks all over it."

"And an aerial assault like this would be impossible without the resources Vos provides," said Megatron. "In order to keep any of our other allies safe, we have to remove those resources."

"Starscream was always obsessed with his ejection from the Vosian Academy. He wanted acceptance from them—not as a warrior, but in his own chosen role."

Megatron nodded.

"The Decepticon conquest of Vos gave him that. If we destroy Vos's military capabilities..."

"We'll take that from him again." Megatron stared off at the ruins.

"And his rage will either blind him or he'll collapse," said Prowl. "Either is better than if he's allowed to have the emotional distance to continue fighting this war the way he has been."

"Exactly," said Megatron.

They looked at each other.

"We're not the Decepticons," said Prowl at last. "We can't kill civilians."

"We'll avoid it as much as we can," said Megatron. "The difficulty lies in the methods available. As I noted earlier, Jazz established contacts in the Vosian criminal underworld. They're not only criminals; some of them are members of the original Functionist regime. We face a not insignificant chance that they'll elect to do something unwise."

Prowl glanced sidelong at him. "And you're all right with working with Functionist elements?"

Megatron hesitated. It turned his tank, if he were to be honest. And he didn't like the idea of it getting out broadly that he was willing to work with former Functionist officials; there was no doubt in his mind that they were, even now, a greater evil than the Decepticons.

But right now, they were a defanged evil. An evil that was essentially powerless. And looking out over the ruins of Praxus, Optimus's plan for the world laid itself out, a world terrible in new ways, and a world that Optimus *did* have the power to create, as the Functionists did not.

"This cannot happen again," he said aloud. "We must stop the Decepticons. If the Functionists survive, we'll deal with that. But right now, I think we'd be fools not to use the tool to hand."

Prowl held a demanding hand out for the datapads. Megatron handed them over. "I'll review them on the flight," he said.

"Good," said Megatron. "Come home. Come home, and help me stop this."

Prowl glanced up at him and smiled a little knife of a smile, and for the first time Megatron felt like there was real understanding between the two of them. There had been professional

respect, and he had known that Prowl was an exceptionally competent second in command, but now he saw the mech under all that for what seemed like the first time, unfiltered by Jazz or Prowl's relationship to him. And what he saw, he could understand, a mind in some ways alien to his own, driven by cause and logic and duty rather than cause and rage and passion, right now entirely focused on that cause and what had to be done, as he himself was.

That, Megatron could understand, and the pain Prowl had shown him this evening he could honor. He replaced his hand on Prowl's shoulder and steered both of them back inside, away from the burnt city, their shared purpose between them like a live uplink, electric where his hand lay on Prowl's armor, in the tilt of Prowl's head as he began to read, in the slight relaxation of his doorwings.

Chapter 84

"Please stop fussing, Jazz."

"I'm not fussing," said Jazz, folding his arms and aiming a pout at Prowl that would have softened him under any other circumstances. "You don't get to just call anything I do when it gets in the way of you being reckless fussing. I'm genuinely worried about you, and I want to make sure you're all right."

"I'm all right." Prowl managed to make his voice soothing, though all of his mind was preoccupied with the datapad in front of him, the layout of Vos's underground.

Jazz put a gentle hand on the top of the datapad and lowered it. "You're not all right, Prowl," he said, firm. "I need you not to shut me out."

Prowl glared at him. "Megatron gave me a job to do, Jazz," he said. "I'm fine."

Jazz searched his face. Prowl felt a twinge of discomfort; Jazz he could not fool. In all honesty, he didn't know how he was. Just that right now, he could function. There was a clear and distinct goal before him, the destruction of Vos, and until that was realized there was no room in his processor for anything else.

"Talk to me," said Jazz. "Even if it's about this. Just talk to me, Prowl. Get back into the habit."

Prowl blinked.

"You've been silent since Praxus," Jazz told him. "Only speaking when someone asks you a question. Barely refueling." Prowl noticed the full cube in his hand then. "You've been better since Megatron brought you back. I can't do my job until I know if it's real."

Doing his job. The attack would need Jazz. Jazz was correct; he would be ineffective if he were consumed with worry.

"Megatron spoke with you." Jazz, still searching his face, as if he were reading answers there that even Prowl was unaware of. "Did it help? What did he ask you to do, Prowl?"

"He asked me to plan the attack," said Prowl at last, and realized modulating the volume of his vocalizer was difficult. He hadn't talked enough for it to come easily. "It will stop what happened to Praxus from ever happening again, to anyone. It will stop Starscream."

"He gave you something to live for," murmured Jazz, a comment not directed at Prowl at all.

He was right. Prowl looked down. Then carefully, back at Jazz.

"You were right," he said. "About him."

"How so?" Jazz seemed to lose a degree of tension, perching his aft on the edge of the desk.

"He is... everything you said." Prowl remembered, clearly, the hand on his shoulder, an island of warmth in a suddenly cruel world. Megatron had known the right things to do and say. "He may yet lose himself."

Jazz watched him, carefully. Prowl ducked his head in shame. He knew what he was planning.

"But you're afraid you've already lost yourself," said Jazz after a time. He reached, covering Prowl's hand with his own. "We're all in this together," he said. "We'll all have to watch each other, Prowler. We'll all have to save each other."

That was what Prowl needed to hear. "I'll come join you for the evening," he said. "Once I send this to Megatron."

Jazz gave him a small smile, a sweet, worried smile, so different from his public persona that it seemed out of place. "I'll be waiting, then."

Prowl sent the strategy. It would be a lot of work, a lot of chance, and they were heading down a dark path.

But it was necessary.

Jazz shouldn't have been in the field to start with, but there were some things you had to do yourself. Besides, his latest conversation with Megatron had left him fairly confident that Prowl wasn't going to go and get himself dead. He would have hoped that he was more professional than to let his conjunx's situation influence his work, but it would have been deluding himself. He was worried about Prowl; he'd *been* frantic, for a time. That was not the right mindset to go into a mission; even if he'd used the same protocols he'd used while being Meister, Sentinel's commander of the guard, the stress in his basal processes would have shown and gotten him noticed by people like Soundwave.

But Prowl had work to do now. And that, after the horrors of what had happened in Praxus, made his survival more certain than anything Jazz could have done as his conjunx.

Maybe that was a sad thought, but Jazz knew who Prowl was. There was no point to deluding himself. Prowl needed work. He needed a goal to strive toward. Revenge, under the circumstances, was about the healthiest goal he was going to get.

So Jazz packed himself up and headed into Decepticon territory to help.

It felt good. His cover wasn't as deep as it had been as Meister, so his own thoughts moved quietly below the surface of his façade, constructed specifically to fool Soundwave; an easily cowed courier frame from Polyhex who was still a simmering mass of resentment and desperately wanted to join the Decepticons and show what he could do. If Soundwave actually got his claws into Jazz, the game would be up; the Autobots didn't know how to begin to construct a defense against what Soundwave had done to Megatron. Jazz shuddered a little, deep within himself, at that thought. Not a lot of the consequences for getting caught scared him, but that one *did*. He'd known, intellectually, what Soundwave could do; seeing Megatron fall apart like that, desperately trying to gather the pieces of himself up once more, stick them together with anger and necessity, was something altogether different, and Jazz had no illusions that he would deal with it any better than Megatron had. He had no previous trauma of that sort, but he was a creature of secrets, *constructed*, specifically, to guard them, and he didn't want to know what his programming might do if someone broke through his layers of defense. It seemed an unimaginable violation.

But for all the fear of Soundwave, this was what Jazz was *meant* to do. And it felt good.

Jazz had thought himself fairly conversant with Decepticon mores given the time they'd all

spent together, but there was a new edge now. The lid was off. Optimus probably thought that his soldiers agreed with his read on Megatron, that the Autobots had betrayed him. And maybe they did—but they had heard the other side of the story, too. That someone had killed a miner, and Megatron had killed the soldier, and been soundly punished as a result. They thought it was justified, and not only that, justice. They thought it was High Command supporting them killing in self-defense, and not even bothering to check if it was self-defense. That High Command trusted them to make that decision. They liked that.

That Starscream had tried to kill Jazz was no secret, either. Jazz suspected Starscream had leaked the information to make himself seem more powerful. To discount Jazz's own abilities, and bolster morale.

The end effect was this: Decepticons in occupied territory taking whatever they wanted, a conquering army that didn't bother with the niceties of legality or even pretending to be liberators, which Jazz was sure Optimus would have preferred.

Jazz was also sure that Starscream and Optimus's other lieutenants were also telling him that resistance was high and vicious and that all of this was necessary, while accepting bribes from their inferiors and enjoying their approval. It would ensure that, should Optimus try to crack down on these behaviors, he would displace himself, leaving Starscream to take the reins. Starscream wasn't interested in a disciplined fighting force. He just wanted a hammer to break the world.

But not all Decepticons were on board with this.

"Get your hands off him."

Jazz tucked himself into the shadows, glancing at the commotion. Deadlock standing next to a brightly painted civilian frame. The civilian's armor was light, exposing protoform and biolights; his optics seemed large under an evidently recently replaced helmet. He also looked terrified. Prostitute, but probably new at it. Didn't know how to fade into the background when someone like Turmoil came calling.

Lots of new pay-bots here, Jazz had noted. With most business outside the military ground to a standstill, anything outside of the traditionally useful fields had stopped being a viable living. Artisans, academics, the fancier shopkeepers, all the fields that the Decepticons had little use for, they'd all run out of options, and with the prices of fuel so dear in occupied territory...

The oldest professions still beckoned, especially to those from classes the average Decepticon despised. And the Decepticons fancied they could identify formerly high-caste bots by looking at them, and knew many of them had ended up as pay-bots, which led to some pretty ugly dynamics.

"Why should I?" Turmoil said, laughing. "He's selling, I'm buying."

"And I'm paying *more*," said Deadlock, firm. Jazz frowned, not figuring Deadlock as happy to take advantage of someone obviously undertaking sex work for survival, as he had, and then realized this was less about purchasing the mech's company as keeping him away from Turmoil. Turmoil had every hallmark of a bad customer; Jazz could see that himself, from here, and he was sure Deadlock had experience to back him up. You couldn't always tell—but Turmoil wasn't even bothering to hide it.

And on Turmoil's end, it was about getting one over on Deadlock.

"Are you now," said Turmoil, even, and the beautifully painted mech gasped. Jazz couldn't

see much from his hiding place, but he was pretty sure Turmoil had pulled a gun on the small mech. "Let's let the shareware decide, huh?"

"I can come back later for you?" the mech said, with a sad failure of a flirtatious smile.

"No need for that," said Deadlock, fist clenching. About to strike Turmoil.

Turmoil's optics flicked down. "You want him bad enough to put your neck on the line, Drift?"

"Don't call me that."

Turmoil tugged the bot close to him. "He just wants you because he used to *be* one of you," he told the mech, who'd gone unresisting and compliant in his hands like a captured petrorabbit. Smart mech, trying to make himself uninteresting, reading that if he fought back, he'd make himself interesting to Turmoil for his own sake, and that was as good as signing his own death sentence. "He wants to know he's better than you." A hand palmed the mech's aft, rough and cruel, leaving dents behind. The mech stayed still. Jazz was impressed—it was the sort of thing calculated to make a bot flinch and squeak.

"Leave. Him. Alone," said Deadlock, advancing.

Last Jazz had heard, the punishment in the Decepticon ranks for striking a superior officer was death. And in light of that, this interaction made sense. Probably wasn't the first one. Turmoil was targeting pay-bots not just because they were disposable, or because some had been high caste, but because Deadlock had been one. Because Deadlock remembered, and still cared. Deadlock was an idealist, in this to make a difference.

This interaction seemed like a culmination of previous ones. Turmoil wasn't going to back down. Neither was Deadlock, who was probably guessing (correctly, Jazz believed) that if he *did* let Turmoil win this time, Turmoil would kill the mech between them just to show that he could. To make Deadlock that much more desperate next time, because he'd know the price.

And the mech between them, who was gamely doing what he needed to to survive, would end up dead one way or another, because if Turmoil could demonstrate to Deadlock that he'd thrown his life away for nothing before having Deadlock killed...

Jazz did the calculations. Then, working quickly, he rigged one of his smoke bombs to a timer and scrambled well away, up the side of the building, over the roof, and a quick leap of faith to the other side of the street, where he flattened himself to watch. He couldn't hear them as well here but he could see the next few moments, Deadlock getting up in Turmoil's face, the bot between them hunching his shoulders, arm limp in Turmoil's grasp.

The smoke bomb went off. Both Deadlock and Turmoil dropped the bot and ran to investigate. The bot ran the opposite direction.

Jazz had to do at least one more good deed. It was indulgent but...the Autobots were fighting for a cause, and he needed at least something to remind himself of that. He tailed the bot until the mech reached his bolthole, a tiny one-room dwelling. He stopped outside, queuing up a voice modulator. "I saw that little interaction," he said. "You wanna get out of here, my mech. Listen carefully and follow these instructions."

Rodimus, bless his chaotic little spark, was still running his rescue missions. Jazz gave the mech the quick instructions to get to a pickup point, wished him luck, and was on his way.

Deadlock would be a useful ally to have, if he could be turned. And maybe, just maybe, he could be turned.

Prowl worked incredibly fast. For the most part, Megatron stayed back watching and listening. Playing the role of clueless figurehead deftly manipulated by his subordinates. This time, he was willing to play along. He wanted nothing to do with the Functionists.

The Functionists wanted little enough to do with him. Prowl, they could tolerate. They'd had word of the role intended for Prowl, and though his Praxian origin was questionable, his experience was acceptable. They would work with him.

Prowl managed them. And Megatron managed his troops, all seething with rage over Praxus. All well aware of the fear Starscream had intended to inflict on the world, that he had meant allegiance to the Autobots to be synonymous with certain death. They were all determined to make certain that would not come to pass. No matter the cost.

They could not allow the Decepticons to strike a killing blow to Autobot morale so early in the war, when they had yet to gain allies. They could not give Starscream this victory.

Failing to strike now—it would kill their cause. It would condemn all Cybertron to the slavery Starscream intended for it.

They could not allow it.

No matter what they had to harden their sparks to do in the meantime.

Megatron just hoped that, when the casualty figures arrived, Ratchet would understand. He probably wouldn't, though, and the thought of his disapproval made Megatron's shoulders hunch a little in anticipation as he thought about it. But he couldn't see another way to do this. He couldn't see a future with a free Cybertron without this attack, and neither could Prowl.

Whatever else happened, Vos's spaceport had to be removed. And since it mixed military and civilian... there was no way to attack it without sacrificing those civilians as well.

At least the munitions depots were military. At least most of the city was divided, civilian from military. The Autobots would use their criminal contacts to bomb the spaceport, mining its support structures so thoroughly it would be utterly unsalvageable.

It would be more sabotage than an outright attack, but it would get the job done. Megatron's role was to lead their armies in a feint, an attack using the relatively easy target of the much-disused ground transport network's Vosian terminal. They were all certain their intel stating it was so weak was bad; no one was insane enough to leave such an obvious target undefended. But Starscream and Optimus assumed Megatron was stupid. He'd play along with it, if it kept his people alive.

He'd do anything he had to, to keep Cybertron free, his people alive, and the sort of mech who could order the death of Praxus off a self-declared throne.

Anything.

Chapter 85

The news came, as most bad news seemed to, in very early morning.

Jazz, in his persona as a virtuous Decepticon, was asleep in what used to be worker dormitories and was now a barracks, bunks that had once held one worker now jammed with two or three complaining mecha, some giving up completely on the bunks and sleeping on the floor. Jazz had already made a reputation for himself as a slippery little bastard mostly made out of pointy kibble and spite, and so had an entire berth to himself.

"Ricochet! Hey, you nasty little fragger, wake the Pit up," someone above him said, and he rolled out of a light standby with a sharp curved knife at the mech's throat. "If this is anything less than a full-scale invasion," he started, and then saw the mech's face.

"The frag is it," he said.

"Look out the window."

Jazz went and looked, elbowing aside his barracks-mates with his usual completely unfair application of his elbow-spines, and looked up.

The sky to the north glowed, faint and sullen.

"None of you mechs ever seen a sunrise before?" he sneered, but he knew better.

"That's not where the fragging sun comes from, groundpounder," someone snarled. "That's Vos. They're burning Vos."

He knew. He knew. He stared at the distant glow, hearing the hitching vents of horrified mecha around him, a few of the flyers were even crying, right there where everyone could see them, and he felt like weeping too.

Prowl had been afraid he'd already lost his way. Megatron was...was like him. Jazz knew too well the decisions leading to this.

Just bombing the military targets shouldn't have done this.

That sort of glow—that was the whole city.

Megatron and Prowl had killed Vos. Just like Praxus.

And he should have been there, been *home*, to stop them.

The first blast picked up the world and shook it, like a titan with a sparkling's toy, and Megatron went flat on his face on the battlefield. He climbed back to his feet, shot a charging Decepticon in the face at close range, and looked around. That must have been the spacedocks. He spared a moment of grieving for the sparks who must have offlined, the civilians who had no part of this—

And the second explosion knocked him back down again, and after that they kept on coming, a long, unending roll of thunder, dust, the smell of scorched metal. He pushed himself up after a time, squinting, but there was nothing to see. The only clarity was the screaming pain of the

Matrix around his spark, death after death after death, too many, too close together for it to make him feel it.

When it ended, he could still see nothing, just the dreadful glow ahead of them where the city gates were, a sullen red.

He coughed, trying to expel dust from his vents, but it just sucked more contaminated air in. "Prowl!"

"Here," came Prowl's voice, after a delay. "Here."

"Report," and Prowl relayed it to one of their reconnaissance flyers and then, "That wasn't the docks," numb, horrified, more emotion than he'd heard from Prowl in weeks. "That was—Primus, that was the entire city."

Megatron put up his weapon, numb himself, and started forward. "Then we offer aid," he said. Prowl hurried to follow him, his headlights a dim glow.

"What?"

"We offer aid," said Megatron. "We go in, and we help, because *this wasn't us*. This was an act of terrorism, the Functionists."

"I shouldn't have allowed them..." started Prowl, and Megatron turned, touching a finger to his lips.

"Our munitions didn't do this," he said. "We didn't give them enough. This was an act of terror, opportunistically executed during our attack, using us as a distraction. We go in there, and we offer aid."

Because that was the only way out. And it was the only right thing to do. They shouldn't have made that bargain with the Functionists. This...this was unthinkable.

Except it was perfectly thinkable, in the wake of Praxus. The Decepticons had done it first. Hadn't it been in the backs of their minds, planning this? It had certainly tormented Megatron, enough.

Even if he would have killed every last one of their allies if he'd known this was what they were planning. This was obscene.

He strode toward the broken gates, what once would have been a grand archway welcoming the few of Vos's ground-alt visitors to the city, what had been the enemy line, and what now seemed a portal into Pit. This was not what he was here for. This was not what the Prime did. He would not wholesale murder civilians! He would not be complicit!

A scream of jets high overhead, suddenly cut off, and Starscream struck him across the face, claws out.

"Get back." Not his usual screech. Something spark-wrung and broken. Megatron took two steps back, making out the dim outlines of Starscream's command trine behind him. "Get back."

"We're here to offer aid," Megatron said, searching out the glow of optics in the dust. "This wasn't us—this is obviously an opportunistic attack, and we have a common enemy."

"Don't lie to me!" There was the screech again. "Don't think you can cover up this atrocity

with an open hand, Megatron Prime. You did this. The world will *know* you did this. And I will burn everything you love in return. Get out." A movement in the dimness. "Or your lieutenant dies with the rest of his people."

Megatron stared a moment, but there was nothing to be done. He backed away, signaling the retreat. With Starscream barring entrance, there was nothing any of them could do.

"What the frag?"

Neither Megatron nor Prowl would look at him. Jazz folded his arms. He'd come back as quickly as he could; he still had Ricochet's fangs and optics. "I said, what the frag. There's no way the two of you went insane while I was gone. So what the frag happened?"

There was shame in the slant of Prowl's doorwings. Megatron didn't look so much ashamed as miserable, his broad shoulders hunched inward as he stared blankly out the window in his quarters.

Jazz huffed an aggravated sigh and stepped fully into the room. "Look, this whole place is soundproofed. Just fragging tell me. What happened?"

"We're still getting reports," said Prowl dully.

"The criminal contacts," Megatron said. "They had their own agenda."

Jazz had made some of those contacts. "Let me guess, the Functionists?"

Megatron jerked his head in a nod.

"We're guessing," said Prowl, his voice quiet, "that they had acquired other munitions than ours, and they mined the entire city. Not just the spacedock, which was bad enough."

Jazz nodded; all three of them had agreed on the necessity of destroying the spacedock.

"They killed the city," said Megatron quietly. "They told Prowl they wanted it free. They didn't just mean free of the Decepticons; they meant us, too."

"Well, it's a hell of a PR victory," said Jazz. "Now we look like deranged murderers too."

Prowl sighed. "Not quite. Some people seem to have decided it means we can defend them, and that's the only thing they're interested in. We've had offers of alliance from three cities so far. When Starscream launches his inevitable counter attack..."

Jazz closed his optics briefly. He'd known it was coming; he and Prowl had talked about it. But the descent into horror was happening so much faster than he'd imagined.

"We shouldn't have allowed the Functionists any part of this," said Megatron dully, staring straight ahead.

"They were the tool we had," said Prowl.

"Still," said Megatron, and Prowl looked at him, like he'd already read a world into the single word. Jazz watched them, spark sinking. He'd wanted them to connect, to understand one another.

Not under these circumstances. Not by sacrificing their sparks.

The poets had spoken of sparkbreak, and now Tarn truly knew why. None of the horrors of his previous life could compare to this pain.

"The Functionist resistance seems to have received at least some of their munitions from the Autobots, as well as diagrams of improvised explosive devices," Starscream was saying, terribly calm for a mech whose home had just been destroyed. "They seem to have also contacted a number of criminal groups, who had come into possession of weapons schematics from the Vosian Academy of Sciences."

He glanced at Tarn. "They left no recordings or explanations. What we know is from forensics and the confession of one captured Functionist extracted by Tarn and Soundwave."

The mecha around the table were very quiet.

"The Functionist claimed that the Autobots knew nothing of their plan to attack the city—the munitions supplied were only for the spacedock. The Functionists instead attacked the entire city, aiming to destroy it rather than allow it to stay in Decepticon hands or fall into Autobot." Starscream clasped his hands behind his back. "I recommend repressing this part of the report. The Autobots conspired with the Functionists; let them wear this as well."

"We can't do that," said Optimus, as Tarn had known he would. "We can't do that, Starscream. It's not true. The very fact they conspired in the first place is bad enough, and should turn most mecha against them."

"Don't be idealistic," Starscream said. "We're at war. The more people who abandon the Autobots, the faster we defeat them and the fewer people who die."

"Still," said Optimus, and frowned. Starscream fell silent.

How could Megatron have consented to exchange one word with the Functionists? How could he do such a thing, knowing them as he had? Or had he a treacherous officer who arranged it? Was this truly his fault, another city burnt and ruined by the lowest enemy of all?

Tarn had to know.

He waited for the squabbling to subside. He went to Optimus once Starscream had left, put a hand on his arm and looked, pleading, into the kind blue optics.

"I need to talk to him," he said.

Optimus knew. This war, so much of their shared sorrow, revolved around this one mech. For that alone, Tarn could love Optimus. For understanding this.

"He may kill you," Optimus said. "He's not the mech I knew. He's probably not the mech you thought you knew, either."

"I need to talk to him," Tarn said again. "The Megatron I knew would never have struck this bargain. He wouldn't have done this. He's better than this."

"He's not the mech you knew," Optimus repeated. "Tarn, he may kill you. We can't spare you. Not now, not like this."

"I have to know if he did this," Tarn said. "Please, Lord Optimus. I have to see for myself if he really has changed so severely." He lowered himself, careful, deliberate, to his knees. He'd spent

too much time, literally and figuratively, like this in his former life. He did not do it lightly now. "Please. We both know I have asked but little for myself, that my one thought has been our Cause—please, let me have this."

Optimus's shoulders slumped and he looked down at Tarn with his grief magnified tenfold. "I don't want to lose you," he repeated. "But I understand. Give me another month, Tarn, and then you may go find him with my blessing."

"I will bring him back to you," Tarn said, fervent. Meaning it. "Of his own will and repentance, or in chains, that I promise."

Chapter 86

Technically, Megatron didn't need to be here right now. This was a small town on the outskirts of Tyger Pax; it wasn't really strategically important enough to merit the Prime taking the field to defend. But right now, they needed all the goodwill they could get, and the Prime fighting and protecting the wounded was a pretty good public relations move.

Ratchet and many of the others were concerned about him actually getting hurt, but Megatron thought it was foolish. That was assuming most Decepticons wanted to engage him, which, for the most part, they didn't. His reputation had preceeded him.

The ones who did want to engage him were mostly the fanatics or angry, and Ironhide was right; angry mecha fighting on instinct alone made mistakes. Mistakes they couldn't afford, when fighting someone as big and heavily armored as Megatron.

He had a gift for battle, Ironhide had told him. He had a long way to go before he really could compete with someone trained for war since they'd online, but that was why he had Ironhide and Impactor covering him. He could trust both of them, he was getting a sense of how they moved, how to slot himself into their shared pattern of violence. It felt *good*, it felt like he'd been sparked for this. It was like a dance with two partners. It felt, in a terrible way, like doing a surgery with Ratchet and First Aid, all of them completing each other's thoughts, not with words but with scalpels and welds.

He loved this.

Yet another thing he couldn't tell Ratchet.

The rage he'd spent all his life pushing away, the snarling beast that lived in the back of his mind and spark, now drove him, a sensation like riding a harnessed supernova. Yes, he fought angry, but it was bridled by his training. It let him shrug aside the scorches of blasterbolts, the stings of blades, but it left his mind clear. Clearer even than off the battlefield.

Beside him, Impactor laughed aloud with delight. Megatron felt it echoed in his own spark, and threw Impactor an exultant grin as he backhanded a Decepticon into Ironhide's reach and skewered the one behind him. The big con doubled over with a gurgle; Megatron's medical protocols identified the wound as severe but nonfatal, and the rest of him recognized it meant the mech might get back up again and kill some hapless Autobot. He brought his axe down on the mech's elbow, destroying the joint, to make sure he wouldn't. Behind him, metal crunched as Impactor took care of the mech coming for his back.

There, only a short distance ahead of them, was the group of civilians they were here to rescue. They'd been pinned down in what had been the town's administrative building. They'd done their best barricading the windows and doors, but it wasn't enough, not against angry Decepticons. As he watched, a blaster muzzle poked out of a gap in one of the windows and fired. They were still alive. *Good*.

Within him, the Matrix roared agreement. A Prime protected his people, and it spurred him onward. The Decepticon army faltered and fell before him.

The kid was an idiot, and the kid was on the battlefield, so Ratchet was also on the battlefield.

Damned if he'd let some other idiot put the kid back together if he stepped in front of the wrong blasterbolt. Heavily armored and Matrix-protected he might be, but if he didn't give the artillery fire right of way he was going to be just as slagged as anyone else. And by the looks of it, he wasn't about to give *anything* the right of way; Ratchet was pretty sure he'd heard the young idiot *laugh*.

Personally, he blamed Ironhide. And Impactor. They were just too good at leading young mecha astray.

Ratchet had his own bodyguards. Or he'd had his own bodyguards; he'd just found a bombed out building and a lot of mecha in it were still alive but only by a pretty generous definition of the word. Megatron had given orders to save as many of the civilians as they could. Ratchet went into the building, and at some point, he'd stopped hearing Sunstreaker and Sideswipe's voices, working fast in the light of his own headlights.

Far behind him, somewhere out where there was daylight, where the energon was fresh, not half-decayed, he heard a voice, and things shuffle and move. He ignored them.

He wished Megatron were in here with him. He was afraid. Not because he was on the battlefield, not because of his own danger.

He was afraid of losing Megatron.

He'd never had any illusions that Megatron was a gentle spark. Someone who'd been through what he had, who was still up and functioning, only arrived at gentleness from the long way, from choosing it because he was capable of such violence. Ratchet wasn't going to pretend that Megatron fighting now was him turning his back on anything. He wasn't going to tell himself that Megatron wasn't a violent person; he absolutely was.

But Vos.

Megatron had told him the whole of the story, dull and grieved. He even knew Megatron had planned for, *allowed*, some degree of civilian casualties in the original plan. Nothing like what had actually happened, of course. But he'd made that decision, and Ratchet had stared at him in grieved horror for several silent minutes. Megatron's expression had saddened, but not yielded.

Yeah, maybe there were calculations he'd made, that killing those civilians now would stop more from being murdered as they had in Praxus later. And maybe those were calculations a leader had to make. They were not calculations Ratchet wanted to see someone so dear to him, someone he had mentored, ever making.

But, as Prowl and Jazz had told him, he'd lost his ability to shield Megatron the moment the Matrix clamped around his spark.

Megatron hadn't come to him to look for absolution. He'd come because he wanted Ratchet to know. He hadn't wanted to pretend he was doing anything but what he was. He hadn't wanted Ratchet to think he was a better mech than he was.

And Vos had gone so wrong.

Megatron and the others had done the brutal calculations and decided to use that.

Ratchet didn't know what to do with that information. All he could do was grieve the mech Megatron had been allowed to be, for a time, before leadership had destroyed any chance he'd had of saving lives, not ending them. Maybe Megatron knew the moral fog he felt his way through now; Ratchet was terrified the young mech was simply making one decision after another, doing

what had to be done, with no awareness of where he was headed. That he'd find himself poised on the edge of a black hole and throw himself in because it was the right thing to do at the time, and become the monster his enemies had painted him all his life.

Ratchet sniffed, realizing that there was optical lubricant on his face. He left it there. The energon went up to his elbows, and who knew what these people had.

He couldn't tell Megatron who to be. He couldn't even be truly angry at the mech, not knowing the whole story as he did, not having seen Praxus. He could understand Megatron's reasoning, he could understand Megatron's horror at Vos going wrong. He hated that. But how could he chastise Megatron for it when Megatron was far from self-righteous about it? One thing you could say about the kid; he was as brutal with himself as he was with his enemies. Was that because of the shadowplay, knowing he could be turned against himself? Ratchet didn't know.

He wouldn't leave the kid. He'd lost enough. But he could be horribly, terribly afraid for him. He could grieve the mech Megatron was never going to get the chance to be, the healer.

The shuffling was coming closer now. Ratchet supposed Sunstreaker and Sideswipe had found him. He turned the corner into the last room, finding the single patient there, and went to work.

At least Megatron was still being protective of civilians. Ratchet didn't know what he'd do if he wasn't.

At least this patient was simple. Only a few more things to do to prepare him to be ready for evacuation, when they'd chased the Decepticons back.

The half-broken door behind him creaked. Ratchet didn't look up. "About time," he grumbled. "Were you trying hand to hand combat with a flyer, like you threatened?"

"Is that what the Autobots are calling it these days?"

Ratchet froze. Tank-churning terror shot through him, visceral disgust. He turned.

Pharma stood in the door, one hand transformed into a heavy-grade plating saw and as covered in energon as Ratchet himself was.

"Come on, Ratchet, aren't you happy to see me? You didn't even come looking for me."

Ratchet realized he was trapped. Pharma advanced on him, saw upraised and buzzing, and Ratchet retreated one step, two—and found there was no space between him and the wall, that he'd moved away from his patient. "I was busy," he managed, but his voice wavered.

He should spit hatred at the other mech. He knew Pharma was only going to hurt him. But his voice and frame betrayed him, every time.

"Ah yes, with that monster you call a Prime." Pharma made a face. "He's no more than a savage mechanical, Ratchet, and you know it. You should have stayed with me."

"No," said Ratchet. "I told you before—we're *done*, Pharma."

"His spike can't be *that* good," Pharma sneered. "He and his Autobot scum are going to die, Ratchet. Come on—join the winning team."

"No," said Ratchet, and gestured to the limp form of the mech he'd been treating. "I'm not joining people who do *this*. Megatron at least tries to *stop* this slag, which is a lot more than I can say for

you."

Pharma's face twisted. "Megatron took you from me. Turned you against him, so he could have a pet doctor to put a gloss of legitimacy on his *murders*. One day, I'm going to make him scream for that. I'm going to show you *who he is*."

"I know who he is better than I know who you are," Ratchet said. He gathered what he had of his aching courage up with both hands and straightened his shoulders. Then he took his blaster from subspace, aiming it with shaking hands. "I'm busy, Pharma. Go away."

"You're never too busy for me," said Pharma, his lips pulling back in something too cruel to be a smile. "You love me, don't you, Ratchet?"

Ratchet felt himself freeze. He had no response, not knowing what to say to the repeated denial. The delusion. Pharma closed the distance between them steadily. "Don't you?" he said, and the familiar edge to his voice was there. Then he glanced down at the wounded civilian. "But you seem distracted. Let me just resolve that for you." He tilted to the side, saw activating with a hum.

He was going to kill Ratchet's patient.

Ratchet moved before he thought.

He shot Pharma.

In the knee, yes. But he shot the mech, and stood there gasping as it registered.

Pharma went down with a startled cry. Ratchet dove past him, gathered up his patient, slinging the mech over his shoulders, and ran.

The irregular jerking motion of his headlights illuminated the rooms he'd moved through, and the carnage within. Pharma had taken his time getting to him because he'd been slitting the throats of his stabilized patients.

Ratchet stuffed his blaster back with a hand that didn't shake. If he'd needed a wake-up call, a realization of just how evil Pharma had become, this was it.

Next time, that shot needed to go through the mech's spark.

"Megatron's here!" There was something almost like panic in the voices of the Decepticons around him, but it was beneath his notice. Tarn elbowed his way forward.

There he was, leading the Autobot line, an axe in one hand, wielding an ion cannon with the other. He made it look effortless, he made it look like dancing, death at his fingertips and a blaze of righteousness around him, his optics bright. He was all the way across the field from Tarn, but Tarn stood transfixed by the sight anyway. He was terrifying. He was beautiful. He was everything Tarn had hoped for over all those years.

He was turned against the wrong people. The people dying at his hands were Decepticons, laborers like him, people who had suffered, just like him, and he was *killing them*.

The Autobots had taken this—this pinnacle of destruction, and they'd turned him against the people he should have fought for. Under his mask, Tarn's mouth twisted. They would *pay*.

Megatron's spark still burned bright, under all this. He had to know if he could be

reclaimed. Redeemed. Brought back to what he should have been.

And if he couldn't, he'd kill him. Better Megatron die by his hand than live like this, a traitor to his cause and his very self.

Megatron saw Optimus and the two of them met in a roaring clash, all Megatron's power distracted and redirected by the other mech. Behind him, a trail of destruction of infantry and artillery alike, a demonstration of his power. That he'd become something closer to a god than a mere mech. It broke Tarn's spark. He'd so wanted to see Megatron like this, he'd so wanted to see Megatron able to do this, and Megatron had aimed it in the wrong direction. At his own people.

He turned away and followed the retreat, grieving and determined. He *would* bring Megatron home.

"Tyger Pax is now firmly allied with us," Prowl said. "Good job, Megatron. It was a good decision to let you lead; that seems to be one of the primary reasons they joined the Autobots so readily."

"Glad to hear it," said Megatron. He'd cleaned off, but was looking forward to remaking the acquaintance of the oil baths with a rather shameful intensity. "I need to check on Ratchet."

Prowl nodded without argument, which Megatron was glad of. They were all well aware of Ratchet's situation—Pharma cornering him, the patients he'd murdered. Megatron was afraid of what that would do to Ratchet's already aching spark.

Sunstreaker and Sideswipe were very repentant, and had apparently genuinely lost Ratchet in the fight. That wasn't going to spare them any of the censure Megatron had already delivered, or that Prowl would deliver. Megatron was leaving the actual disciplinary measures in Prowl's hands; he was a little worried about what he himself might do if given the task. He was *very* angry.

And angrier still at Pharma.

If there was justice in the world, Ratchet should have had the opportunity to kill the mech, but Megatron knew Ratchet. It would hurt him worse than it would help. The best Megatron could do was what he was currently doing; offering Ratchet some time, and a friend.

He'd already tried to send Rung Ratchet's way, but Ratchet had stubbornly talked shop the whole time, and the result was more or less useless. So, on Rung's recommendation, he was trying an alternative.

Rung had told him it would also be good for him, which Megatron found embarrassing and amusing. Despite the horrors of the last few weeks, and the unpleasantness of having the memories of the mines dragged once more to the surface, now he had something else that demanded his attention, he felt well enough. It was Ratchet's wellbeing that occupied his mind.

He found Ratchet in the hospital, because of course he did. With the beginning of hostilities, one of the existing hospitals near the student housing where most of Autobot High Command was living had been converted to primarily military use. Ratchet spent most of his time there.

Megatron checked his office first, but wasn't surprised to find it empty. He went to the intensive care unit after that, walking through the automatic sanitizers and smoothly replacing the technician at Ratchet's elbow to help with the last procedure of the day, following the directions of the nurse with a wry smile; he knew them about as well as Ratchet did, these days.

"You're off duty now," he told Ratchet. "Don't make me call Rung to enforce it."

"Smartaft," said Ratchet, but they'd just finished with the last patient in the ward and he had no excuse. Out through the decontamination room once again and then onto the street.

It felt unreal, doing that. It was late afternoon, and people went around their business as if nothing were going on, as if casualties from the war weren't pouring into the hospital behind them. Mecha had dinner at cafes, stopped to listen to musicians, laughed.

Megatron thought of the besieged cities, the surveillance footage of Decepticon-occupied territories, and he briefly closed his optics. Upon a time, he'd hated mecha like this for their luxuries, for being able to laugh carelessly while people like him died to put the energon before them. But it didn't mean he wanted them all dragged down into the same misery. He wanted everyone to live like this. Not only a select few. And that was what the Decepticons seemed to be setting up.

He was, above all, meant to protect the Cybertronian species as a whole.

And yet, he could understand their enemies better than he could the laughing mecha around them.

Next to him, Ratchet had lapsed into silent glumness once more. Megatron gently towed him along into the building, then down to the oil baths. There were few enough people there at this hour; Prowl had probably gotten wind of what Megatron intended and scared them off.

"Here," Megatron said, aiming Ratchet at the biggest of the pools. There were a pair of fluffy towels there, and his suspicion of Prowl grew considerably.

Ratchet grumbled but went. Megatron followed him.

"If you ask me, *do you need to talk about it*, this brush is going in your optic," Ratchet told him, waving one of the small pointy polishing brushes at him.

"Understood," said Megatron. He went to work on Ratchet's back plating. "You do need to talk about it. And before you stab me, that's not asking. That's telling."

"You little..."

Megatron chuckled. "Who do you think you could tolerate talking to?"

Ratchet lapsed into silence. Then, unusually honestly, "I don't want to think about it."

"I expect not."

"It's not like you talk to anyone."

"True," said Megatron. "I didn't realize you were following my example. I'm not sure I would recommend it."

"That's unusually self-aware of you."

Megatron sighed. "I put out an order for Pharma's arrest. He murdered those civilians while they were wounded; it's a considerable crime."

"Like burning Vos."

"Like burning Vos," Megatron agreed, spark twisting once again. "We're still looking for perpetrators there. We put the weapons in their hands, that much as true, but what they did was horrific."

Ratchet was silent.

"I'm not asking for forgiveness for my part in it," Megatron said. "That's not your burden to bear, Ratchet."

"I can't stand that you're carrying it."

"I know," said Megatron again. "Ratchet, I understand your concern."

"My concern?" cried Ratchet, twisting under his hands to round on him. "I didn't teach you to kill civilians! I didn't teach you to—to fight like that! Megatron, you're losing yourself and it's like you refuse to watch it, refuse to acknowledge it! Like if you don't look at it, the thing these decisions are turning you into, it won't be happening and I can't stand it!"

Megatron stared down at him, deeply shaken. He didn't know what to say.

"All the time I've known you, someone's been trying to take you away from yourself," Ratchet said. "First the shadowplay, then the Matrix, then the Decepticons, now the Autobots. When are you going to guard yourself against it? When are you going to stop and say no more?" He drew a hitching vent. "Megatron, how will you *know*?"

He'd spoken to Megatron's own deepest fear, the Matrix's guidance twisting him away from who he was determined to be, and he had to tamp down the unreasoning anger, the immediate dismissal. He vented, slow and steady, a calm he did not feel, and realized Ratchet was crying.

"When you talk about attacks, and offensives, and killing civilians as necessary, I hear the Functionists," said Ratchet. "I hear people like that talking with your voice. Don't you know better? Didn't you learn better? Weren't you determined to be something else than that?"

Megatron had no response. He did his best—tug Ratchet in against him, to a firm hug.

"I hear you," he said, though he didn't want to, though part of his mind wondered if Ratchet were projecting Pharma onto him. "I'm sorry. I hear you." It was the best he could offer.

Ratchet snuffled wetly, returning the hug as a brief sharp squeeze, and then extracted himself, turning his back on Megatron in an unspoken demand to have his plating tended to.

It wasn't as if he hadn't been afraid of that when he'd made the initial decision, Megatron thought as he cleaned Ratchet's back, then turned to have the favor repaid. The oil felt good, soothing aches he'd not fully acknowledged. He'd known what he was doing. He'd hurt, thinking of it. But it had needed to be done and he knew it. It had just... gone wrong.

But Ratchet looking at him with that fear cut him to the spark, and while he wanted to lash out, he trusted Ratchet. He couldn't let him down further. So instead of further dwelling on it, he said, "The Prime can order a conjuncting annulled with the approval of one party. I've drawn up the order already; if you want it done, it only needs your signature."

Ratchet snuffled again. "Yeah. Good job, kid." A pause, a firm scrub with the brush. "Thanks."

"You defended me when I needed it. I intend to return the favor," said Megatron, putting it

as simply as he could. "And Ratchet—Pharma's actions aren't your fault. We are here for you."

"Yeah, got that the first time," said Ratchet, and the conversation ended there.

"Do you really have to go?"

Jazz snuggled harder into Prowl's arms. "'Fraid so, love."

"I'd prefer you wait a few days." Prowl tugged him a little closer, leaning forward to bump their noses together. "Perceptor and the others are so close to a shield for Soundwave's telepathy."

Jazz made a face; that shield had been the product of his operatives installing monitoring equipment in their helmets, just in case they did get caught. The equipment was rigged to transmit the gathered data at the first opportunity, whether or not they were still online. Mostly, they hadn't been.

"I... don't think it would be a good idea. I'm worried we haven't had any clear indications of their next targets, and I've been hearing worrying rumors. I don't want to wait."

"A few days, Jazz," said Prowl.

"Prowler, you know they're not going to hit the deadline. Then they actually gotta do the procedure and then they'll want to watch me for what, a week? Yeah, no." He tried to put some humor into it and failed miserably. "And I want that stuff installed in High Command first. I can wipe my drives, and I can self-terminate. You and Megatron can't. And if we don't have good intel, and if Megs keeps insisting on leading from the front, he's in danger anyway."

"I hate it when you bring that up," said Prowl, but didn't argue the point.

"It's no party for me either," Jazz admitted. "Let's talk about something nicer. How about Megatron? I think we can both agree he's nicer."

Prowl snorted. "I suppose so."

"You still got the same misgivings you had about him?"

Prowl's face closed down again, and Jazz's spark ached. "How could I?" he said after a time. "I was afraid of him losing himself, and dragging us with him, and yet, the two of us made those decisions in Vos. We did that together."

"If there was any fault, it was that your plans weren't sound," said Jazz. "Not that you were too ruthless. The Functionists..."

"We shouldn't have used them."

"You said that to me at the time. And you didn't find a way not to use them."

Prowl was silent.

"It's war," said Jazz. "We're all going to lose ourselves. We're all going to do things we thought were impossible just a few years ago. But we have to keep our people online. We have to do what we can."

Prowl closed his optics, nodded once.

"We'll get through this. Together."

A pause.

"You want to court him, still," said Prowl. "You want both of us. After what we did, together."

"Yeah," said Jazz. "We're all monsters here, Prowler. But we're here to keep the innocent safe, not tread them into the mud. That's what we're fighting for. A world where no mech has to be afraid because he's smaller or weaker or poorer than those around him. A world where people can have lives, can be different, and don't have to feel death constantly behind them. And actually doing that—that's going to require some hard choices. We are going to feel like we're losing ourselves. Sometimes we might be right. But we have to try."

"He understood me," said Prowl.

"He gave you something to live for," said Jazz. "Something that *you* could live for. Just like we gave him something to cling to after Soundwave got done with him."

Prowl lay there, his optics hooded, obviously thinking.

"We don't have to ask him now," said Jazz.

"No," said Prowl. "I'd prefer to ask before you leave." Unspoken: *Because every time you leave, there's always the chance you won't come back.* Both of them were all too familiar with that thinking.

Jazz chased that familiar foreboding away with a grin. "Great. Let's do it."

Chapter 87

They no longer coordinated or plotted in Megatron's rooms; now there was a proper office, or rather, a series of offices, a buzz of voices carrying through the building. Over the months since Iacon had officially allied with the Autobots and the destruction of Praxus, the Autobots themselves had grown, developing a bureaucracy in layers like an organic mollusk. Now Megatron technically had generals and civilian administrators. Those generals had aides and armies (small ones; they were still building their alliances) at their fingertips; the civilians had logistics experts, legal experts, medical administrators, scientists, economists. Those logistics experts had storehouses and repair experts, the scientists had laboratories full of students and assistants... the list went on, multiplying with every layer down, and there were days when Megatron himself wasn't entirely sure how many mecha he was responsible for.

The alliances were always changing, too, adding a layer of difficulty.

There were shipyards and spaceports and imports and exports to manage now. There were entire aid organizations who handled refugee health. Shuttles to fly him from city to city. Massive communications networks, and more growing all the time.

Granted, it was held together with oral lubricant and a steadfast terror of the Decepticons, it was like running on a conveyer belt, but Megatron had abruptly found himself at the head of a functioning government.

The largest impact on his life seemed to be the amount of paperwork he was expected to do on a daily basis.

Also, he wasn't allowed to do anything fun anymore. He'd just been sternly forbidden from taking the field in the same way as he had at Tyger Pax by Prowl, who seemed extremely worried that he'd run afoul of some trap. He wasn't even allowed to go to the free clinics in the poorer parts of the city without an armed guard, which seriously defeated the purpose. He'd have tried his hand at sneaking out if one of those guards hadn't been Jazz, who was, frankly, better at sneaking than he could ever hope to be.

Despite that, he was happy.

Well, sort of happy. He was...satisfied. Because for once in his life, he was actually able to make changes. For once in his life, his arguments had a hope of doing more than changing a few minds of the powerless. Now, his arguments carried real weight, could mean the difference between success and failure of a law that would touch millions of lives, could make him allies or enemies. They mattered. They were having a greater impact than he could ever have dreamed. His decisions *mattered*, and he could get the things done that his people had waited generations for. He could look the old order in the optic, and tell them to stand aside, and they had to listen. They had to *move* for him, because their own rigid, foolish hierarchy told them they had to, and because his mecha were the only thing between them and utter destruction, and also because he had the sparks and minds of everyone who kept them propped on their valued pedestal—a pedestal that had begun to wobble.

He had power, for once in his life, real power, and he loved it.

It meant he could do *something*.

So while he kept up a sort of grumbling about paperwork, he didn't resent it. He might, in

time, but right now he was too acutely aware that the datapads passing under his hands had lives riding on them. Even the requisition orders. And with that awareness came a relief. He was finally able to help. All those whispered promises in the dark to Terminus—he was making good on them.

He might not be able to save everyone, to do everything, but Primus, it was more than he'd ever been able to do in his life before.

Right now, he was reading the summary and implementation proposal for the measures to counter Soundwave's telepathy. It was comforting, but he still wasn't sure about the decision to give High Command priority over Autobot Intelligence; one of those groups was definitely at a lot more risk. But Prowl had signaled that it wasn't up for debate, and in that, at least, Megatron was willing to trust him. They were doing the final tests now; they wanted him on the slab for the procedure in the next few days.

He shuddered a little, thinking of what that procedure would entail, but if it kept Soundwave out of his head forever, he'd endure just about anything.

He signed off on what needed signing, then moved to the next pile. This one was on one of his pet projects; he'd saved it until the pressing military matters had been dealt with, and now he needed to work fast before the next emergency surfaced.

One of his first acts as Prime had been to ban Empurata in all Autobot territories. The follow-up to that was to pardon all Empurata victims—the Functionists had used it as a punishment for political dissidents, so there was little chance of pardoning someone who'd done something actually heinous—and establish a system to give them access to restorative surgeries.

Today's problem with that was a shortage of hands.

Hands, Megatron had learned in his time with the Decepticons, were easily damaged in battle. Most of the time, they could be fixed with surgery, but sometimes they needed complete replacement. Replacements were very difficult to manufacture, especially for specialized functions—medics being only one of many examples.

This many replacements in a short span of time—because Empurata survivors didn't *have* hands—was frankly impossible. Megatron had opened the floor to project proposals, and that's what the pile in front of him was; engineers, scientists, and medics all trying to design a hand that would be easy to manufacture and install to meet the needs of the majority of survivors, leaving specialist-crafted hands for specialists—or people studying to become specialists. Megatron was trying hard to work in a provision for mecha who wanted to change their function down the line to be able to apply for better hands.

With the force of his friends, with his Autobots and the people behind him, even if it was just in a handful of former city-states, Megatron was building the future that he and Terminus had imagined together.

He wished Terminus could have been here to see it. He wondered what Terminus might have said.

There was a cough from the office door. Megatron looked up. Jazz grinned at him from the doorway with a red visor and a lot of fangs. He hadn't changed his paint yet.

"Fancied a change?" he asked, raising an optic ridge.

"I'm about to go undercover," Jazz chirped, and came around to Megatron's side to perch

his aft on the desk next to his paperwork. He braced himself with an arm, leaning into Megatron's space, mouth quirked in a smile. "I don't like this news about some new Decepticon hanging around. He's big, he's apparently pretty smart, he's got some sort of outlier ability to kill people with his voice—which honestly should be *your* thing—and he's a real aft. And I'm just about the only person I trust not to get slagged in the process."

Megatron frowned at him. "If they capture you, the rest of us are slagged. Who'll be my spymaster?"

"I've got contingencies, sweetspark," said Jazz, leaning forward with a teasing grin. "Now, you want a kiss before I go? Because this," he gestured to his mouth, "is about to go away for a bit. This disguise comes with a faceplate."

"You're a bonded mech, Jazz," said Megatron, though it came out more startled than reproving.

There was a discreet clearing of vents from the doorway, which then whooshed shut behind Prowl. "While Jazz's method of approach isn't exactly what I would have recommended, the offer comes from both of us."

"Can we court you?" asked Jazz, staying where he was and looking carefully into Megatron's optics. The playfulness was gone; instead, Jazz sounded tentative, gentle. Prowl put a careful hand on the desk near Megatron's own.

"Jazz and I have spoken about forming a trine with someone before," he said. "We...would like that to be you."

Megatron looked from one mech to the other, then hastily put down the datapad so he didn't crack it in his surprise. It was—he was fond of them both, very fond, intimately fond, for him. He regarded them on a level with Ratchet and Terminus, and the bulk of Jazz's presence, the small distance between his hand and Prowl's were both wonderful, exciting temptations.

But he knew better.

He'd learned from Optimus.

And as much as he loved Jazz's gentle, teasing smile, belied by the concern in his optics, he was still half-complete. A portion of his spark had died with Terminus, and he was a fool to burden another relationship with it—because anyone he went to berth now he wouldn't be fragging for their own sake, but out of longing for a mech long dead. Whether that was to imagine their touch was his, or to feel something other than that grief, didn't matter. It would be cruel either way.

Or, if there was the smallest chance that Terminus was still alive, and how he hoped there might be, he would only betray them for him.

And the idea of that intimacy terrified him completely, because of what Optimus had done with it. He couldn't bear to have his lieutenants think less of him as Optimus had. Even if part of him recognized their sincere offer, wished he could return it, flinched from the blow he'd have to deal them.

"I can't be the mech you hope I am," he told them at last. "I'm still mourning Terminus, and I can't burden you with that regret."

He reached for their hands, hoping a physical touch would lessen the disappointment he saw as they looked at each other. It brought their attention back to him, startled. "Both of you mean

a very great deal to me," he said softly. "I hope, if Terminus truly is dead, that there might be a day I can say yes. But I cannot now. And I do not want you to wait, should you find someone else, because I don't know if that day will ever come."

The two of them deflated, looking at each other. Megatron himself wanted to deflate, seeing that, and part of him was dreadfully envious at the silent conversation that passed between them in a glance.

Jazz moved his hand away. "Got it, boss-bot," he said, with a sad little smile. "Entire faction's got its burdens."

Would they be angry with him for the denial? Megatron looked to Prowl, questioning.

"We understand," said Prowl. He glanced at Jazz again, doorwings drooping a little more. Megatron could see that both of them were terribly disappointed and not bothering to hide it. Part of him winced at it.

"We don't see your friendship as anything lesser," said Jazz. He seemed to realize Megatron's hand was still there, an open invitation, that his retreat might have been seen as a condemnation. He tentatively extended his hand again, resting it lightly against Megatron's palm. It was a touch easily dislodged, probably deliberately, and Megatron appreciated that.

"We're happy with whatever you want between us," Prowl added, mirroring Jazz's smile. It looked uncomfortable on his face, but he met Megatron's optics steadily enough. "And we are sorry if we overstepped."

"You didn't," Megatron hastily reassured them. "I'm honored. I just—I can't. Not right now."

They nodded, only a little out of sync.

"We're here if, or when, you decide you can." Prowl was doing most of the talking now. "And if you don't, we understand."

Megatron's turn to nod, jerky. "Thank you," he said, then, uncomfortable, "Jazz. You'll be careful. Or it won't just be Ratchet yelling at you."

Jazz's grave disappointment vanished as if it had never been, hidden by an impish smile. "Since when am I not careful, Megs? I promise, I'll make you proud. The 'Cons won't even know what hit them."

Prowl's expression, not one for smiling, nevertheless faded fond. Some traitorous part of Megatron wondered what it would be like to see that aimed at him. He stamped it back.

He'd learned his lesson with Optimus, he reminded himself sternly, and tried not to feel like he'd made a mistake.

"Now," Jazz went on, as if nothing had happened, "I need to get my aft down to the detailers and get me a new paintjob. Since I don't want any little birds singing to Soundwave what that's gonna be, this is goodbye and good luck!" He patted Megatron's hand, quick and light like he was afraid he wouldn't get away with it, then grabbed Prowl and planted a firm kiss on his mouth before sauntering out of the room. Prowl watched him go. Megatron wondered if he realized he had a hand partway to his mouth.

Then he shook himself, doorwings fluttering, and started after Jazz. "I've got a new set of

reports from Tyger Pax," he said. "I'll send them your way once you've finished with the repair initiative there."

He paused in the doorway, leveling a neutral look at Megatron. "And we mean it—all of it. We're behind you, Megatron, no matter our role. Please believe that, if nothing else."

With that, he was gone. Megatron turned his attention back to the datapads in front of him, ignoring the ache in his spark, the feeling of having mistepped, in favor of knowing he was doing something meaningful.

It mostly worked.

"Fragging Optimus," growled Jazz over his comm to Prowl, standing in a private bay and waiting for his new paint to dry. "Fragging, fragging Optimus. I bet that's it. I bet that's why he said no."

"Despite my similar suspicions, Megatron's reasons for turning us down aren't ours to examine," said Prowl. He sounded unusually low about it, too.

"It was Optimus. It was absolutely Optimus. Optimus did something when they were together and now he feels like he isn't even allowed to interface." Jazz shifted from one foot to the other. "If I get the chance I'm putting sand in his fragging energon. Fragger."

"Jazz," said Prowl, quellingly. "You are not to risk yourself to put sand in Optimus's energon. Regardless of what he has done to our Prime."

"Arrgh," said Jazz, making a mental note to do just that, if he had the chance.

"Jazz," said Prowl again.

"Fine," said Jazz. "Fine. I'll be good."

He was still stewing about it on a mostly subconscious level when he arrived in Decepticon territory, and it was probably for the best. Lots of other Decepticons had a lot to stew about, and all of them seemed perpetually angry. Jazz fit right in.

All was well for the first week or so, as Jazz worked his way carefully closer to his target, the mech leading Optimus's new appalling 'Justice Division'. Big, purple, tank treads, a mask like the Decepticon emblem. Jazz hadn't had much of a chance to hear the mech's voice, or see him use his ability, but just those claws alone were enough to seriously put a crimp in someone's day.

Jazz kept working, insinuating himself like a barbed sliver of metal in protoform. Tarn had to have a history. He had to have come from somewhere. He had to have a lever, a desire, something, because Jazz did not like what he was seeing. He didn't like the Decepticons having someone with these abilities at their beck and call. It made him nervous.

Janitorial mecha got everywhere. So he played the part of a janitor. It got him into Tarn's quarters, at least. A quick search turned up nothing.

Jazz paused, wondering. The prudent thing was to go home, but he hated the idea of returning to Megatron empty handed. He wanted—

Behind him, he heard the locking mechanism beep. He could either run for it, or bluff his

way through, and he might not have enough time to get to the air vent. He got busy scrubbing.

The door opened. Jazz turned around. "What? You were on the schedule for today. Serves you right for coming back early."

Tarn was—was very big. Jazz refused to be intimidated, but the many, many knives hidden under his plating gave him comfort.

Tarn also had a way of silently looming.

"I'll just be going, then," said Jazz. "You're obviously a mech who values his privacy." He trundled his mop and bucket toward the door.

A clawed hand shot out and grabbed him by the scruff, hoisting him off his feet. He was bounced up and down a little, like the mech was getting a feel of his weight, and then a clawed hand reached forward and ripped his facemask off.

"Hm," said Tarn, while Jazz hung stunned in his hand, like a startled scared Deception might. "Autobot Jazz. What a pleasure."

"What the frag are you on?" Jazz demanded, a squeak of terror in his voice that wasn't as completely faked as he would have liked. "Syk? Nuke? Because I'm not some fragging Autobot, you—"

"You should know who I am," Tarn said evenly, "and why real Decepticons don't talk back to me. Why the real janitorial staff doesn't come into my quarters. But you're not a real Decepticon." Jazz could see the corners of his optics through the mask, see the way they turned up at the edges. "We have our spies as well."

"Frag off!" Jazz snapped, and writhed in Tarn's grip to get at a knife. Tarn swung him into the wall, hard.

"And who else would the Prime send than his spymaster?" said Tarn, and Jazz gasped and froze; something had clamped icy agony around his spark.

"Got you," Tarn said.

"Just kill me and have done with it!"

"By rights I should turn you over to Soundwave and have him crack that pretty little processor wide open," said Tarn. "But that's not what I need today."

Jazz was trying to think of something pithy to say, now that the pain around his spark had backed off, and failing miserably. How the frag had his cover been blown so completely?

"I need you to take Megatron a message," Tarn said. "He and I are long overdue to meet again. Do this, or die here." A pause, and then, filled with amusement, "Don't worry. I'm sure hearing from me will make him *very* happy."

Chapter 88

If he had anything but absolute trust in Ratchet, he wouldn't be doing this.

Megatron lay back on the slab, turning his arm so Ratchet could induce stasis via coding, a far more comfortable method than through chemical means.

The specifics of which he was remembering so clearly because Ratchet was making it a point to make him recite it, probably to keep him calm about a medical procedure involving his brain. He wanted to be annoyed and thankful at the same time. It wasn't a comfortable mental state.

"And under what circumstances is chemical stasis appropriate?"

"When a patient's access ports are inaccessible, they are too badly panicked to allow the code transfer, or if you suspect they may be carrying malicious code," Megatron responded, dutifully. "However, chemical stasis is more dangerous and harder to regulate. The likelihood of both overreactions and stasis failing during a procedure are both higher than with coding-stasis."

"Very good," said Ratchet. "Hold still. I'm executing stasis now."

Megatron felt a lurch of anxiety, but then the world fell abruptly away into the comfortable nothing of stasis.

He woke up propped in the recovery ward. He had a minor helmache, nothing more, and Ratchet was hovering by his shoulder. "I've got the full records of the surgery if you want to see them," he said, as soon as Megatron's optics blinked online. "In case you need reassurance that the installation of the anti-telepathy mods was all that happened while you were out."

"Thank you," said Megatron, accepting the datapad. He didn't feel the need for it now—he trusted Ratchet, he wouldn't have done this otherwise if he hadn't, no matter how scared of Soundwave he was—but if he woke feeling panicked in the night, he wanted it close to hand.

"Soundwave won't be able to touch you. Not after this," said Ratchet, with a reassuring smile that was too tight around the corners.

Megatron pushed himself up, winced as it jolted his helm, and held out a willing wrist for a pain chip. "What's wrong?"

"Jazz missed his check-in," said Ratchet.

Megatron didn't say *frag* out loud; he'd realized that commanders swearing aloud produced a disproportionate fear response on the part of the mecha they commanded. He just stood up, fast, winced and lurched a little as his helm protested, and went to find Prowl before Ratchet could object.

Ratchet didn't object aloud, just followed him and pressed a cube of medgrade into his hand. Megatron drank it reflexively, then kept going.

He realized he was feeling guilty, as if telling Jazz and Prowl *yes*, however bad an idea it was would have prevented this, somehow better focused Jazz's mind and kept him out of trouble. It was a ridiculous thought, he realized, and he tried to put it aside. But it didn't help the ball of dread at the bottom of his tank. Jazz could wipe his drives, which would ensure that Soundwave wouldn't

get anything out of him. At least he'd be spared that. But it wouldn't save him from the violation. It would also destroy his recent memories, and he'd need a restore from a backup. Only people who'd been sparked as spies could do that, or who'd undergone a lengthy and painful reformatting, much like what Trepan had done to him, and Megatron really didn't want to see what the side effects for Jazz might be in the short term.

And that was *if* they could get him back from the Decepticons. It was all too likely they'd find they couldn't dig through his brain and then discard him.

They had negotiation plans in place for senior officers, the sort of people who were unlikely to be returned via a traditional prisoner exchange. But that assumed the Decepticons would be interested in trading prisoners. From what Megatron had seen, that was unlikely. Mecha who would burn a city to the ground probably wouldn't bother keeping a spy alive to hand him back to their enemies.

"What happened?" he demanded when he reached his office. Prowl had seen him coming and was already there.

"All we know is Jazz missed two of his check ins," said Prowl. "The initial one, four days ago, didn't raise the alarm. It happens sometimes. Today's..."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"I've got our minor operatives looking for information," said Prowl. "So far, nothing. I'd expect Decepticon High Command to make an announcement if they did capture him. He'd be a significant find. In the meantime, Mirage has taken command of our Intelligence division. He's working on it. I'm having Dominus, Minimus, and a few others draw up plans for negotiation with the Decepticons—what concessions we're willing to make for Jazz's safe return. I...didn't think it would be appropriate for me to be involved in that."

"Likely wise," said Megatron, and hoped Prowl could hear how unhappy he was with the idea, too. "Do you need company right now?"

"I'm fine," said Prowl, and the tone of his voice as good as told Megatron that he wasn't fine at all.

"I need assistance with this speech," Megatron told him. "It's fine as it is, but this section has been giving me trouble for the last two days. We need to strike a balance between the Academies, but there must be a better way to word it. And I don't like the clause in the treaty with Polyhex about the fine crystal trade—we're using those as focuses in medical lasers, aren't we? I don't want to be boxed into a monopoly."

He didn't want to be focused on crystals and trade right now, not with Jazz's life in danger, but they needed Prowl functional. Giving him a puzzle to distract him—that was the best he could do while they were waiting.

That night, an Autobot patrol on the recently-recaptured outskirts of Tyger Pax found Jazz.

"Minor injuries but stable," the patrol's commander reported over comms, to Megatron and Prowl's vast relief. "Mad as Pit, though. Keeps saying he's embarrassed. We'll have him home by sunrise, sir, don't worry."

"Give me that communicator," said Jazz's voice. Then, "Hey. Yeah. Sorry for freaking you two. I'm... mostly fine. Nothing Ratch can't buff out. Ready for a long chat with you when I get

there. Have some fragging midgrade ready and something sweet, would ya?"

"I'll make sure of it," said Prowl, and then Megatron added, "Even if I have to steal the lead dusting out from under Senator Metalhawk's nose," which made Prowl smile and Jazz snort a laugh.

Jazz hung up. Megatron and Prowl looked at each other and Prowl made an abortive gesture like he'd almost thought about hugging Megatron and stopped himself.

Megatron just looked at him and opened his arms.

Prowl, looking disbelieving, tucked himself into the hug with a long huff of vents.

If Terminus didn't come back, if he was really dead and Megatron could properly finish mourning him—he could certainly desire this with Jazz and Prowl. He could find this wonderful, even with the piece of his spark missing.

He just needed that certainty, first. And Jazz, too.

Just because Tarn had decided to return him hadn't meant he'd been *nice* about it. It wasn't even proper torture, per se—just a general sense of carelessness. Like he could just toss Jazz around, thoughtlessly, and not pay any particular mind to the yelp.

And whatever the frag the message to Megatron was, Jazz didn't fragging know. The mech had peeled up a section of his back kibble and fragging *written* something on it, and again, while not *agonizing*, it had *sucked* as an experience.

A lot of that suck had to do with just *how fragging creepy it was, FRAG*.

And then he'd just thrown Jazz into a dark box for, by the feel of it, a few days, and then dropped him, cuffs and all, from a pretty decent height, in front of an Autobot patrol.

Yeah he was feeling bruised. And dented. And a lot of that was his ego, which was gonna take a while to heal.

But frag, it was good to be home with everyone fussing over him and with... Prowl and Megatron seeming pretty okay with being close to each other?

Jazz's optics narrowed. As soon as Megatron was out of the room, he dragged Prowl in. "Hey, what's up with that? Is he...?"

"He hasn't said anything," said Prowl.

"He doesn't usually like touching," said Jazz, squinting at him suspiciously.

"He doesn't. He was worried about you. Don't get your hopes up. He said no." Prowl said it quickly, firmly, as if he were making a list. Jazz just kept giving him that suspicious stare.

"Don't," said Prowl, and then tucked himself onto the edge of the bed. "Really, Jazz, are you all right?"

"Fine. Dandy. Just peachy. Fragger," said Jazz. "You know, Prowl, I had no fragging clue he was onto me. None at all. And he got me within the first five minutes of me snooping in his quarters, told me the janitorial staff didn't dare go in there. It was on the roster and everything, though, and I'd seen other mecha go in there so—frag, he'd made me before I even set foot in there.

Someone must have leaked it, somewhere. I ain't going out in the field for a while, that's for sure, and Mir and I are gonna have to spend a while looking for our leak."

"It's of grave concern. Whatever resources you need are yours," said Prowl, with a burr of rage to his voice that made Jazz smile.

"Leaks happen, my mech. It's part of the game."

"This leak nearly cost us our head of Intelligence," said Prowl, still utterly unimpressed. "Maybe you can accept that, but I want a name."

"And a head on a pike," Megatron said, coming back in with a tray filled with energon and confections alike. "Your order of midgrade and sweets."

Jazz and Prowl exchanged a look. Jazz was heartened to see an identical expression of confusion on Prowl's face. *Is he...flirting with us?*

"It's unacceptable," Megatron went on. "We were strict with the information that you were out on a job. Whoever leaked said information either was one of the people in the field you contacted—"

"Who were all handlers for other people," Jazz said.

"Or was someone highly placed back here."

"Could have been one of the detailers," said Jazz. He shook his head. "I'll deal with the spy. I'm a big bot, I can fight my own battles. But the thing that creeps me out is—it wasn't even *about* me. He probably would have nabbed any operative headed back home. Because he had a message for Megatron, specifically, and he definitely wanted to send it in one specific way."

"Is that why your backplate is missing?" said Prowl, in tones that made it clear he definitely wanted to take more than a backplate off of Tarn, in payment.

"That is why my backplate is missing. I know he wrote something on it. Ratchet's off trying to figure out how to make it show up."

Megatron had gone very, very still next to them. Then he hurried off.

"So someone's acting weird," Jazz remarked.

"Yes," said Prowl. "I...hope he's having second thoughts, but I'm not sure."

"We'll just wait." Jazz leaned back with a sigh, wincing a little as he did. He reached out and snagged a rust stick, beginning to munch.

A few moments later, Megatron returned with Jazz's backplate in one hand and a UV wand light in the other, an irate Ratchet trailing him—the plate having evidently been snatched from his hands. "Look," he said, and turned the light on the inside of the plate.

A series of symbols flared to being. They were totally indecipherable.

"The frag's that mean?" Jazz asked. He didn't like symbols unknown to him.

"Mine sign," said Megatron. "Most miners are illiterate, but you have to pass information somehow. Tunnel collapses, dangers, where people are or where their bodies are buried. It's crude, but effective. This," he touched a symbol with a reverent finger, and looked up at them with the joy

all but blazing from his face, "this was Terminus's designation. He's alive."

"And the Decepticons are holding him," said Prowl, and Jazz smoothed his own expression blank so Megatron couldn't see the way his spark had dropped right through the floor. Getting Terminus back was—was great for Megatron, obviously, Primus, look at that face, look how it had come to life, such life it was clear that any happiness Jazz had seen him express had been a pale shadow of the real thing—but there went any chance they had with him, and just after things had looked hopeful, too.

Like frag they were going to say that out loud. Megatron deserved to be happy.

Megatron's mouth compressed. "Yes. They're holding him. This—these are terms. Tarn wants to talk to me before turning him over."

"Tarn, the guy who can *kill people by talking to them*, wants to *talk to you*. Mech, do I gotta point out the obvious conclusion to this situation?"

"There has to be a way," Megatron said. "I've sacrificed him twice, once to stay a medic, once to be the Prime our people needed. I don't have it in me to do it a third time."

"Where?" said Prowl. "And when?"

"Two days from now, at an old flophouse on the outskirts of Iacon." Megatron looked wryly amused for a moment. "Mostly used for assassinations prior to the war—if you were lucky enough to get a few days off and your assignment was on Cybertron, and you'd made enough to pay to go to the *good* bad parts of town... it was sort of a byword for decadence and that's how it got into the mine sign. It was before my time."

"We'll scope it out," Jazz said. "No promises."

"Thank you," said Megatron, still all but glowing all over the place.

"Alrighty then," said Jazz, pushing himself up again. "Let's get my back kibble back where it belongs so I can go have a well-deserved reunion with my conjunx. I'm just about done for the day. Maybe even the week."

"Thank you for understanding, Jazz," said Megatron, and went off, still pretty much glowing.

"Let me guess," said Ratchet. "I've been watching you two make eyes at him for weeks. He said no?"

"Yeah," said Jazz, sighed heavily. "He did. Glad he's getting Terminus back, at least."

"I am too," said Ratchet. "You didn't know them when Terminus was around. They were inseparable. He...lost something of himself, when he lost Terminus."

"Yeah, we got that impression," said Jazz. "He sounded like he'd be interested, but was still looking for something like closure. I'm glad it's coming in this form—as long as Tarn wasn't fragging lying."

"He could be fragging lying," Ratchet said. "But who would have told him?"

"Optimus, maybe. If they were fragging, I bet it came up." Jazz shook his head. "Primus only knows how that torqued up his romantic relationships. But we're speculating. I wanna

recharge in my own berth tonight, doc-bot, can we please make that a thing?"

"Hold your pistons, I'm working on it. Stay still."

Jazz obeyed, staring glumly at the wall. He'd spend tonight busily sulking with Prowl, and that would be that. Megatron had a right to share his spark with whoever he wanted to, and if that was someone else, mech had made up his mind. The two of them needed to settle into being his friends instead. Because only a real slagger would behave otherwise.

Jazz made the arrangements because he didn't trust Megatron with it. Frankly, Megatron agreed. The threat Tarn posed faded in his mind next to the possibility of seeing Terminus again. Next to knowing Terminus was alive.

Jazz had pointed out it could be a lie. Some of the Decepticons knew about Terminus and about Megatron's connection to him. Tarn could simply use that as a lure, with Terminus just as dead or missing as he'd ever been.

Megatron tried to consider that, to accept it as a possibility, and failed miserably. The excitement was just too great, the relief too strong to let him push it away, to entertain, even for a moment, that this was a lie.

"We're rigging you with audio surveillance," said Jazz. "You can turn it off here and here. There's an old security system installed in the building that I tried to get access to—I think it's still working, but we haven't managed to hack the systems yet. Some places involved in...questionable activities before the war had systems specifically designed to keep Enforcers out. I think that's what we're dealing with."

"There will be security teams stationed around the building," Prowl added. "We won't give you exact locations in case you're somehow compromised. And yes, Jazz will be there in person."

"And I'll be armed," said Megatron. "I'm not going into this blindly, Prowl. I want Terminus back, and I won't let overconfidence take this chance away from me."

"That's all we can ask of you," said Prowl. "We've all memorized the maps, yes? Then let's do this."

Megatron stepped outside, then transformed, settling into his alt mode. Jazz, next to him, followed his lead.

"Hey, you all right?" Jazz asked, once they were well down the road. "This has got to be a lot, yeah?"

Megatron thought about it. "Perhaps it is," he said. "But I can only focus on the task before me; too much depends on it."

"I hear ya, mech." Jazz settled into silence as they drove, though Megatron could all but feel how tense the mech was. "I just...wanna make sure we get you back, too," he said, as they turned the corner and their destination came into view.

"I'll make sure of it," Megatron said. "I'm not that eager to get out of my duty."

"Heh." Jazz's spark definitely wasn't in it. "Just be careful, is all."

"I will." Megatron came to a halt and flipped back into his primary mode, frowning up at the building. The top stories had been burnt out, but the lower floors were still standing, as solid as the pictures he'd seen before the war. The door hung open, nothing but darkness beyond it. To either side of the door, faded, gaudy posters curled up at the edges. The windows were boarded over, and the old sign was long dark, the light elements cracked. There was a faint glow coming from behind the boards of a window on the third floor.

The city around him looked deserted, but he knew it wasn't. He made a mental note to compliment Jazz and Spec Ops about that, and then unholstered his weapon.

"Your microphone is on," said Jazz. "Scream if you need anything, we'll come running."

"Understood. If I'm not out in an hour, come get me," said Megatron, tipping Jazz a grin to say, *See, I'm being careful!*

He took a deep vent, then another, and walked forward into the dark maw of the abandoned building.

The silence settled around him before the staleness of the air even registered. Debris crunched underfoot, and Megatron stood there while his optics switched into their low-light settings. He'd worked in darker. All the same, he tried not to look too closely at some of the huddled piles of debris. At least he couldn't see or smell fresh energon.

He found the stairs half by feel and started up them, grimacing as a foot clanged against what he was pretty sure had been someone's hand, long ago. He found two more bodies, long dead, before he reached the third floor.

The door he wanted was obvious; it was the fourth one over, door ajar, brilliant light spilling from the crack. He hurried to it, pushed it open with a foot, leveling his weapon at the room.

The mech within looked up in a way that seemed very familiar.

The room had evidently been cleaned and neatened, the recharge slab easily big enough for two large frames. Two cubes of energon stood on the desk. But Megatron's focus was entirely on Tarn, because there was something *so* familiar about the mech, about how he was sitting, about how his optics settled on his frame.

The intelligence reports had never had a good picture of Tarn, and even if they had, it wouldn't have been like this. It wouldn't have conveyed the mech's actual physical presence, and no one who wasn't looking for it, who didn't know to look for it, would have known.

Megatron stood staring for a few moments, then put his weapon down and crossed the tiny room in three strides. Tarn stood, the same size as he was, maybe a little taller now.

"Do you know me?" he asked, and though his voice had *changed*, Megatron knew, knew even before he reached up and disengaged the locks on his mask. "Tell me, Megatron of Tarn, do you remember me? Do you remember *who you are?*"

Megatron vented sharply, backed up a pace almost out of reflex, because there had been a threat in that familiar voice. He stared as Tarn carefully lifted away his mask with talons as vicious as Megatron's. At the beloved, familiar face, edged with unfamiliar purple, unfamiliar scars.

"Do you fear me?" asked the mech he'd assumed was only Optimus's latest hired bully.

“I do not,” said Megatron, because he didn’t. Because he’d ceased to fear when he’d walked away from Optimus, because his worst fear had been realized, long ago, when they’d taken his mind and Terminus from him, one after another. Because he could never have feared the face looking back at him from the shell that was Tarn, even now, even when he should. “Because you’re alive. Because everything I feared had already come to pass, and having you back—it can only be good.

Tarn laughed. His voice was different, sent uneasy ripples through the Matrix, through his spark. He wondered if it were intentional.

“You’re more right than you know,” he said, and moved forward. Megatron’s plating shivered, his presence so familiar. He half wanted to step forward into an embrace. He raised a hand.

“May I?”

“Yes.”

He brushed the backs of his knuckles against the familiar cheek. Stared across into optics the mirror of his own, the face so like his, only faintly broader, said the name, not knowing if it would provoke the other mech to violence.

“Terminus.”

A clawed hand cupped his cheek, drew him in close, and the hard edge of the mask’s frame pressed against his helm. “Megatron.”

Chapter 89

Chapter Notes

Another one of those chapters where you should mind the fic's content warnings.

"Primus." He heard his voice crack before he felt the emotion. Agony, hot and fresh as it had been what now seemed ages ago, coursed through his lines and spark. "Primus, what did they do to you? What have you suffered? I thought you were dead."

"They took care to make sure you did," said Terminus.

"They did change you."

"They tried. What didn't erode under their hands is what you now see."

He saw a monster. He knew that, for all that he pulled Terminus close, for all that he accepted it, and it closed his intake with horror that Terminus was reduced to a thing of rage and death. They had planned such things together, things so far from this with them on opposite sides, with Terminus become a fanatic at the behest of still crueler masters.

If he could even see that.

The mech he'd loved was likely gone. He told himself that, but couldn't believe it. Still believed, deep in the spark of him, when he spoke. "You have changed less than I might have thought."

Tarn—Terminus, smiled. "I'm glad you can see that."

"I didn't dare hope," Megatron said. "They told me nothing was found in the ruins—even Ratchet didn't know I'd survived for—for years, after."

"And he came to find you, did he?" There was an edge, still, to Terminus's voice.

"He tried," Megatron said. "They imprisoned him."

Terminus hummed an uneasy note at that. "And so you came to the Decepticons."

"I'd hoped they could be so much more," said Megatron, then, too hopeful to keep his words cautious, "Don't you see, Terminus? I left because they weren't interested in equality—they just wanted to be the ones doing the kicking. I'm not *interested* in being the one doing the kicking, I want *real* change, a dismantling of the systems of power that put us in this situation in the first place. I want a world that runs fairly, and kindly, and so every mech has an equal chance at the life they want. That was the world we dreamed of. It's not Starscream's."

Terminus was frowning again.

"Come back with me," Megatron said, taking the hand cupping his face and pulling it into his own. "Optimus's way isn't the only way. Come see what we *can* build. Please, Terminus."

"A world full of comfortable, middle-class mecha," said Terminus. "What place would I have there, Megatron? What place do you have there, except for their pet? A polished, tame miner, to legitimize their luxury?"

"I have the place I took with my own hands when I threw the corrupt nobles from their power," said Megatron. "The place I made when I walked away from the Decepticons, who've been far more interested in seeing me dance on their leash than the Autobots ever were. I have the place I've made of reproach and rescued mecha, for as the nobles oppressed us, they also found ways to oppress their nearest and dearest, so loving the taste of control that they couldn't bear the idea of their conjunxes ever having the chance to make a decision. I am building a civilization from the ashes of cruelty, and I refuse to accept that any mech, regardless of altmode, is useless or inherently evil—and that is a trap the Decepticons have fallen into as thoroughly and deeply as the Functionists ever did. They even violate minds, Terminus, so do not pretend their sins are lesser."

Terminus's mouth compressed, disappointed. Megatron pressed onward. "I don't do this because I think that those who committed the sin of being comfortable when we were oppressed should be dragged into that oppression; I want every mech lifted to the same level of comfort, of security, and yes, of freedom. I wrote *peace through tyranny*, and I wasn't correct; no mech, no group of mecha, will ever accept tyranny. Will ever allow there to be peace while a boot is on their throat. *Freedom is the right of all sentient beings*—there, there I was right, and that I will fight for."

He paused; Terminus's face was now unreadable.

"I, too, have changed less than you think," he told the other mech.

Terminus nodded curtly. "You still have your way with words, if nothing else. And what of Vos?"

"An error," Megatron said. "Unreliable operatives. We didn't lie to you, or to our allies, about that. For your part, Terminus, what of Praxus?"

Terminus jerked his head. "A necessity."

"There must have been a different way," said Megatron. "Not the eradication of an entire people."

"Do you think the Praxians cared about us?" snapped Terminus. "They only wanted stability, regardless of the corpses holding up its foundations."

"What of Jazz?" pressed Megatron. "Carving your message into his plating was unnecessary."

"It, too, was necessary, though your concern for your subordinates does you credit. But how else would you know who sent the message?"

Megatron frowned at him.

"How do you think I was getting your work off Messatine?" Terminus asked. "Dead miners, every week, so many of them... it was the only route open to us after they banned you from terminal access."

"Another way to turn our brethren into objects," said Megatron, disgusted.

"Weapons. I gave their deaths a purpose."

They stared at each other a short time. Megatron's tank twisted in on itself, wondering just how much Terminus was himself and how much the weapon of the Functionists—and if this viciousness had been there the whole time, lurking.

"You have changed less than I might have thought," he repeated, only this time he didn't keep the sadness from his voice.

"Still my bright-sparked idealist," said Terminus. He reached for Megatron again and pulled him in. Megatron went. The temptation was too great to resist.

Terminus's kisses were as sweet as he remembered, their frames fitting together as if nothing had happened. As if no time had passed.

Terminus backed him up, and the berth caught him in the backs of the knees, making him sit suddenly. He wasn't sure about this, didn't like the feeling of being submissive, but this was Terminus, returned to him, and whatever the differences between what he had been and what he was now were not his fault, not his choices. "Terminus..."

Terminus leaned over him, nuzzling against his faceplates. "Lie down," he said, and heat surged behind Megatron's panels at the words. He drew in a sharp vent, hands clenching on the berth's edge.

"I said, lie down." This time it was stronger, a wash of pleasure almost like the start of an overload. Megatron looked up at Terminus, and sudden anger tamped down the arousal. "What are you doing?"

Terminus drew back.

"There's something about your voice. What are you doing with your voice?"

"A skill. A skill I learned in your absence. Pleasant, is it not?"

"Pleasant, but not what I want." His voice was perfectly steady. "If we do this, as we are now, without our usual procedures, we do it as equals."

Terminus was frowning, he could tell. Part of him wanted this, wanted to just submit. But after Optimus, he *couldn't*.

"You should know me better than that. Come here." He put a note of command into it, and gestured to the berth next to him.

"I no longer take kindly to being led," he said once Terminus sat. "Was that a test?"

"Perhaps." A tentative hand stroked his treads, seeming to marvel over every ridge.

"Do you want this, this way, instead of with me submissive?"

Terminus nodded.

"Good," said Megatron, and heaved himself up to straddle Terminus, biting hard at the side of his neck. Terminus grunted in surprise, and Megatron grinned as his mouth filled with the taste of energon.

Heavy claws raked his back, just enough to draw energon and dent plates. Megatron arched into it with a groan, then remembered something vital. He did *not* want his protective, well-

intentioned Autobots listening in on this.

He found the microphone tucked into his collar fairing, and said, "Stand down. You may check on me in an hour," and, in the absence of a visible off-switch, crushed it.

"Your Autobots keep a close optic on you," Terminus observed.

Megatron shrugged. "We trust each other. They trust my judgement, and I trust them with my life."

"Many of them are nobles, or high ranked administrators, or generals," Tarn said. "You're close with the mech whose family used to administer our mine."

"He suffered at his House's hands in many of the same ways we did. Including shadowplay," said Megatron. "I trust him. He trusts me."

"Don't you worry about them looking at you and seeing a Disposable?" asked Terminus. "Making that call, one day, when you're on the battlefield and trusting them, that your life isn't worth it?"

"If they make that call, they'll be right." An involuntary smile quirked Megatron's mouthplates. "There can always be another Prime. If they do an equation that makes that come out as a negative sum for me—they're right. Besides, among other things, they'll be staring down Ratchet."

"Ah," said Terminus. "How is Ratchet?"

"He's doing well." Megatron rolled his hips slowly against Terminus's plating. Terminus's pelvis jerked up, like he was already thinking about getting his spike into Megatron. "Disappointed I'm not finishing my medical training, but my duty to my people comes first."

"I see." Terminus's servo stroked over his aft, slipping between his legs to press at his panel. Megatron opened the locks, letting Terminus push it open and aside. He pushed his face into Terminus's shoulder, sighing as a digit explored him, settling to rub back and forth over his slit and node.

"I missed you," he said. "Everything I did, every noble I ousted, I thought of you."

"I'd feared you'd lost your way," said Terminus, and slid his finger in. Megatron's vents hitched with it even as he pressed his hips down to meet Terminus.

"I didn't," he said. "I only found the next group of mecha who needed me. Our war didn't end with the Functionists. It will only end when the mecha who thrill at others kneeling and begging them are ousted from power, permanently. You told me to remake the world. You told me I *could* remake the world."

Terminus pushed a second finger into him, spreading him, deliberate and slow. He nuzzled into Megatron's neck in turn. His panel opened, spike pressurizing. He twitched his hips to press its shaft against Megatron's hard node, moving with little jerks.

"I missed you," he said at last, as if he were admitting to a crime. "When they were rebuilding me, changing me, even when I didn't know who I was, I thought of you. I remembered your touch, your voice, the hope you made me feel." He lifted Megatron, far more easily than he should have been able to, but Megatron helped him the last little distance as he lined his spike up with Megatron's valve. Megatron twisted a little in his grip, grinding down onto the head, and

Terminus released him, let him sink down on his spike at his desired pace. It seemed, somehow, bigger than Terminus's ever had been.

"But most of all," Terminus said, optics devouring his face, as if he were trying to fix it in his mind, "I remembered you *falling*, and that grief—that grief kept me *immune*." His hips moved. "We'd defied them, you and I, but to see you die like that—I thought we'd lost."

"No," said Megatron, bracing himself on Terminus's shoulders, and he began to move, rapid and hard, fragging Terminus like the desperate intemperate young mech Terminus probably still saw in him. "We won that day, Terminus. We started a revolution—a cataclysm. We won. And you're here. That's a far greater victory than I'd ever imagined. We won, and now's our time to build a new world."

Terminus caught him around the waist and started fragging him just as hard in turn. Megatron was gasping, tightness in the core of his tanks, the world narrowing down to where Terminus split him open, the sheer perfection of the spike in his valve. He overloaded abruptly with a shout; Terminus pulled out of him and stroked himself to completion, striping his abdomen with transfluid like a claim.

Megatron hung onto him, panting, until the world stopped spinning, then leaned in and kissed him deeply. "I missed you," he said again. "I missed you so deeply, Terminus. I'm glad you're here."

"You as well," said Terminus, and tipped them back onto the bed, tucking Megatron in against him, back to front. An arm looped over his waist.

After a little time, he trailed his fingers down Megatron's front and dipped between his legs again, taking his anterior node between them and stroking it slowly.

He chuckled. "We're not as young as we used to be."

"I'm not," said Terminus, and Megatron found himself relaxing that little bit more. Terminus finally *sounded* like himself again. "I don't see what you have to complain about."

Megatron snorted. "It's been an eventful few years. Did Decepticon Intelligence get wind of the priest-biting incident?"

"No?" The familiar amusement remained.

"Functionist priest spent an entire sermon insulting all of us, then tried to bless me with a hand on the back of my head." Terminus snorted derisively. "Exactly. I bit him. Ratchet had to surgically reattach several fingers. It tasted awful."

That got a real laugh from Terminus. "I don't know why I doubted you in the first place."

"I also apparently tricked a not insubstantial number of the Iaconian nobility into believing I was immune to poison, which was very much worth the unpleasant night I spent after drinking poisoned energon." Megatron grinned at that memory as well. "Ousting the old guard was an entertaining process, let's just say." He hitched his hips forward into Terminus's hand; the touch there was building a pleasant heat in his valve, the folds swelling and pressing together. He was still wet from his first overload; he reached back and pulled Terminus's hips flush to his own, Terminus's semi-erect spike nudging his back. He smiled, thinking of how nice it would be to have it in him again.

"You're just as beautiful as I remember," Terminus said. Megatron groaned, bucking up into

his stroking hand. Terminus crooned into his audial, and Megatron gasped, rearing and trembling in a minor overload. Skilled hands traced the insides of his thighs, urged him wide. After a moment, he gave in, parted them. Terminus, he could trust, he had trusted.

Terminus murmured, wordless again, brought heat blooming in his valve. One hand stroked up his chassis, over his ventral plating and to his spark. The other stroked between his legs, the sensitive junction between thigh and pelvis, a gentle ghost of a touch over the major energon lines there. He leaned back into Terminus's solid bulk, let himself relax, lost himself in the simple feeling of another's touch. Of being able to trust.

Terminus rolled his hips against him, a slow fluid movement. "I shall not leave your side," he said softly. Megatron's hands clenched and he made a small noise, quickly strangled. All he had ever wished to hear. Primus, as changed as Terminus was, as different as Tarn was, he wanted this, he never wanted to let go again. "Please," he said aloud.

One hand wrapped around his spike. The other dipped down from his node, exploring, not yet entering. He pressed into it, hissed as the thumb returned to circle his node. A finger pushed into him and he bit the edges of his intake to keep from crying out, made a tiny stifled noise anyway and pressed his helm back hard into Terminus's chest.

"Oh, my dear, why are you afraid to show yourself? I know you. I know how you were. You don't need to play the leader for me, my love. Not here." The flat planes of Terminus's mask nuzzled against him. When had he replaced it? Megatron couldn't recall him letting go, moving to lift it. But a lot of things seemed to be going hazy. He couldn't bring himself to worry. "Not now. All is well. Relax, my love. Let me care for you, this time."

Control was a habit. He didn't know if he could break it. Before this, before Terminus, he'd been a different mech. One allowed to cry out in berth. One who could show himself that way to a lover. He didn't know if he could return to that.

"Let me care for you," said Terminus again, soft. "Allow me to return this, in however small a way."

He let out a long, shaking gasp. Terminus had two digits in him now, pumping slowly. "There," said Terminus. "There you are. Show me, my dear. Please."

He vented hard, something like a soft moan. Terminus's thumb rubbed over the slit of his spike, pressed against his anterior node, and he did moan this time, soft, but a moan.

"I dreamed of this," said Terminus. "Oh, how I dreamed, when we'd be back together. Safe. We'll end this war, my dear. It will be so easily ended, after all we have done. Optimus will listen to us, you'll see. Peace, my love. What we've fought for for so long." He lowered his voice. "It will be ours, at last."

The last sentence tipped him into overload. He arched in Terminus's arms, gasping, then limp, and Terminus's hands were on his hips, damp with his own fluids, and a thick spike slid hard into his trembling valve.

It was almost too much, too soon, a prolonging of the vent-stealing pleasure. Almost too painful. But Terminus stayed still until he ceased shaking, hands stroking, gentling him, and at last he relaxed again. Another nuzzle. "I forgot how beautiful you are," he said. "Primus, I forgot. I feel a fool—even *he* shouldn't have been able to steal that from me."

He moved, his spike pushed deep. Megatron stopped trying to fight the noises he made.

Still quiet. He had never been a loud mech. But this felt like as much a release as the overload had been.

“Good,” said Terminus. “Good. Surrender to it. It’s been so long, hasn’t it? But I’m here. You don’t need to wear your mask of command, do you? Not with me, my love.”

Megatron arched, trying to angle his hips better, trying to get more, and Terminus pulled entirely out of him. Turned them over, with Megatron under him and slammed back in. No more gentleness, but they were beyond gentleness, and Megatron arched up into him with a cry. A hand stroked over his chestplates. “After all this,” said Terminus, and he could still hear him, perfectly clear, as if Terminus were speaking into his audial, “After all this, I have one thing to ask you, my love. One thing.”

Anything, he thought, gasping. *Anything at all*.

“Might we merge? After all this time, my dearest, after all we’ve been through, might we at last complete what we started?” That hand again, pressing over his spark.

His spark felt heavy, full, lonely too. He wanted nothing more. This was what he'd been waiting for, wasn't it? What he'd refused Phantasm's bullying brat for? He opened almost without thinking, the whirl of his spark reflecting off of Terminus's mask. He was close, teetering on the brink.

Terminus sheathed himself to the root and stayed there trembling, his hot vents washing over them. Megatron came undone. Heat rushed into him, wetness, and Terminus's chestplates slid open. He caught a brief glimpse of a brilliant spark, and then Terminus pulled them together.

He cried out. For a moment there was utter bliss. Joy.

And then disgust. Wrongness. The sickly sweet taste of rot in spark and frame all at once, and his optics shot open. He tried to struggle but somehow Terminus had become stronger, inescapable, and his spark filled with the feeling.

He stared up into Terminus's optics, seeing a mirror there of what he felt in his spark. This—this wasn't all Terminus, but neither was it all alien. There had always been this cruel possessiveness. Terminus had always intended him for a purpose. Terminus never had meant for him to stray from it.

"Terminus," he said, weak. "Terminus, please. Stop."

"Tarn," the mech above him snarled, and pushed down on him harder, hips hitching forward and grinding his still-hard spike into Megatron's soft mesh. Megatron cried out. "My name is *Tarn*."

Megatron wanted to get a leg under himself, an arm, flip them, but what was happening to his spark overwhelmed him and all his body would do was try to flinch his chestplates closed as Tarn started fragging him harder. His spark overwhelmed, Megatron flailed, feeling his very sense of self eroding, like it had under Soundwave. "Tarn *please*," he cried, hearing his own voice stutter and break.

Tarn groaned a second overload at that. He leaned down, pressing the ridge of his mask to Megatron's mouth, as if he thought it was a kiss. It was sharp enough to bruise and dent, cutting his lip. Megatron closed his optics and turned his face away with disgust and horror.

His frame shuddered as his spark tried to retreat from the other one assaulting it. But Tarn

wouldn't let him go. He felt himself sobbing, from a distance. He wasn't pleading anymore. It wasn't going to work. He lay there and endured, hurting so badly he wondered, briefly, if this was what it was like to die.

He felt the spark overload rising, mostly in Tarn, and tried not to react, but the peak of the sensation, when it came, was terrible in its pain and intensity. He cried out again, a plea. Tarn didn't listen. Megatron felt dizzy, unable to move even once Tarn climbed off him.

"There. There, just sleep," said Tarn softly, a hand pressing against his face. His vision fizzed into static, and darkness seized him, dragged him down into oblivion.

Jazz was partway into the building when the first pained cry rang out.

"Stupid, stupid fragger," he hissed, and hurried up the steps toward the third floor room in time to hear Megatron scream again. It twisted his spark over on himself.

If he was screaming, he was probably alive. Cold comfort. Jazz took the last flight of steps at a bound, helm popping above the landing in time to see the door open and Tarn emerge, carrying a limp Megatron over his shoulder. "Autobot Intelligence, freeze and get those hands into the air!" he shouted, but Tarn just broke into a run.

Jazz cursed and gave chase, but Tarn knew the territory even better than he did and had a head start. They scrambled through the darkness, up to the next floor and the moment Tarn got onto the next story, the open stairwell slid shut and Jazz realized, with another curse, *that they had somehow missed the fact the inaccessible, bombed out upper floors were a hologram!*

A hologram *hiding a shuttle*, Jazz realized as the engines came to life. He pulled out a cutting torch but that was some high end slag Tarn had gotten his filthy servos on, because it lifted away before he made any progress. Fragger had come prepared.

"No!" Jazz took off in pursuit. He couldn't *not*. His gaze fixed on the shuttle's tow hitch. Maybe if he could just grab on—! "Hang on, Megs, I'm coming! I'm not gonna let him have ya!"

He hardly noticed the effort of leaping roof to roof until the roofs stopped, the edge of the remains of the suburb, and he had to grab a support beam to bring himself to a stop before he hurtled off the edge and into the night, still reaching for the shuttle. "*MEGATRON!*"

But the shuttle was gone, far ahead of him in the ruined wasteland, its running lights shrinking, shrinking, indistinguishable from the stars.

Chapter 90

He couldn't entirely remember the dreams as he came slowly, hazily back up to himself, but they were uneasy. Full of reproach, of a feeling of having let everyone down—a distinct impression of trying to get back to business as usual and Jazz and Prowl checking everything he did, distrust in their optics.

He woke fully with a lurch of disorientation in an unfamiliar location, and then he realized he was stasis-cuffed and shackled. He jerked upright off the berth, turned his helm to find energy bars between him and the rest of what looked like a shuttle cabin. Tarn was looking at him.

Megatron snarled at him.

"At least the Autobots haven't completely defanged you," said Tarn. Megatron realized with crawling unease that he was clean—he couldn't feel any evidence from their night together, which meant Tarn had to have cleaned him, *touched* him, after everything. He leveled a glare at Tarn, pushing himself up off the slab, only to be brought up short by a collar around his intake.

He couldn't even raise his hands to scrabble at it, as he wanted to. Instead, he snarled at the other mech. "Is this what I am to you? A beast past its use?"

"You're a traitor. You're dangerous." Tarn's voice was cold. "And you deserve no benefit of the doubt whatsoever." He advanced on Megatron, lowered the bars, and stepped into the cell. Megatron pressed himself back into the wall, plating rippling with disgust. "What are you doing?"

"Kidnapping you, of course." Tarn's optics narrowed in amusement. "What else would I be doing?"

"Betraying me," said Megatron, and Tarn *laughed*.

"Betraying you? Oh, Megatron, we are far, far past that." Tarn touched his sparkchamber. Megatron flinched violently back. Tarn pretended he hadn't noticed. "We sparkmerged last night. It gave me... clarity. It showed me that the mech I thought you were never existed. I thought you were someone who could wipe clean the old, let us all start anew without the trammels of a society that enslaved us. But no. What lies here," he tapped, hard, enough to cause pain. Megatron stared at him. "What lies here is *soft*. It's the spark of an *idealist*. And that, I have no time for. That is not what will save us."

"Tarn..."

"I'm not going to kill you. The Prime is valuable, no matter his shortfallings." Tarn rose. "I will deliver you to my leader, and let him decide what is to be done."

"And you think he'll *listen* to you?" snarled Megatron. "Optimus doesn't *listen*, Tarn. He waits for what you say to fall into the reality he's decided exists."

Tarn looked down at him. "I think he's not a fool, which cannot be said of *you*." He huffed air out of his vents. "To imagine I believed *you* were our salvation. To imagine I thought that *thing* would make you stronger."

"It didn't make me stronger," said Megatron. "I was strong enough to start with. Stronger than any of you fools claiming that oppressing others liberates yourselves."

Tarn turned his back and left.

He felt sick with the memory of Tarn's spark. Sick and weak and angry. He slumped back onto the slab, tanks roiling, and closed his optics.

They'd probably use Soundwave on him. He had to be ready to face that. He drew a ragged vent. To face it without showing his terror. Primus, it seemed impossible, especially now.

He tried not to think about Tarn. About what Trepan had made Terminus into. Hadn't Trepan said something about turning Terminus into a monster, one that Megatron would have to kill?

His spark twisted again and he crushed the desire to purge brutally.

He couldn't think about that. Right now, all that mattered was surviving and getting back to his Autobots. He wouldn't allow this to take him from them.

With Terminus gone, they were the only people he owed *anything* to.

"I lost him," said Jazz for the fiftieth time, horrified and miserable, and Prowl spared a pat between his mate's doorwings before he turned back to his work; trying to make the derelict hotel's camera system tell him what the frag had happened to Megatron in that room. "I should have gone up the instant he turned off that microphone--"

"You were pretty sure it was to interface and you didn't want to interrupt him," Prowl reminded him. "You wanted him to be able to make that choice for himself. You wanted him to have something nice for once. Something for himself. And you were pretty sure that it wouldn't play well if the mech who'd asked him out a few weeks earlier were the one to break up his reunion with his "one true love"."

"Love the sarcasm on the last bit, Prowler," said Jazz, with a sickened ghost of his usual humor.

"Evidently, it was a poorly judged title." Prowl spared a moment to acknowledge that he was extremely angry with Tarn, who'd now hurt both his mate and a mech he cared deeply about; Jazz's wounds were bad enough, but a mech who could earn that kind of adoration from Megatron and throw it back in his face like this...!

"I should have gone up sooner," Jazz said. "Even seconds earlier..."

"It was luck," said Prowl. "Luck alone. You can't undo what happened, Jazz. Now, we can only save him."

"If Tarn left him alive. Prowl, he was awful limp...I don't know if he was gray yet but the lighting was bad..."

"If Tarn had killed him, it's much more likely he would have taken a trophy back. Miner frames are heavy, and Tarn isn't much bigger than he is."

"I just wish we knew if he were even alive!"

"I'm sure they kept him alive." Prowl looked at Jazz, hunched miserably, decided not to spare him. "I think his survival is the least of our problems. Starscream is over there. Pharma is over there. And whatever Tarn did to him..."

"And Optimus is real bad at restraining people," Jazz finished.

"You go put together an infiltration team and a plan. I'll see what I can get from this." Prowl turned back to his work. "We will get him back, Jazz."

"From your mouth to Primus's audials," said Jazz, and ghosted away.

The command room's doors swung open and Tarn strode in, dragging a mech with him.

It took Optimus a second glance to realize the mech was Megatron, unhurt except for a few cuts on his face, probably from Tarn's knuckles. He was walking on his own, Tarn's hand clamped around his elbow, hands stasis-cuffed behind his back, looking sullen and dim-opticked. He leaned away from Tarn, as if he thought Tarn might—what, hurt him more than necessary to keep him under control? Optimus's mouth thinned at the thought. Tarn was a professional. Megatron was too suspicious.

Tarn stopped in front of Optimus and pushed Megatron firmly to his knees. "My lord," he said, inclining his head. "I bring you Megatron Prime, leader of the Autobot oppressors."

Megatron stared up at Optimus, optics dim, chin up, as if he thought he were the hero. As if he were anything but the puppet of a corrupt regime.

Optimus had hoped the mech might be reasoned with. That he'd see he was in the wrong. He'd had a fantasy of sitting down with him, sharing a cube of energon, and *talking*. Resolving this. He'd apologize for what had happened with Soundwave, if he needed to. But, surely, after all of this, Megatron had to understand the necessity of that better now? He hoped leadership would have changed the mech. Instilled him with a sense of real responsibility, the responsibility of a commander.

Looking down at Megatron's sullenly defiant face, Optimus realized that had not happened. That the mech looking up at him was still blinded by his own entitlement. There were people, among the lowest classes, who expected that the fall of the Functionists meant they could get everything they wanted without paying for it. Without working for it. That they could simply *take*. It was people like that who kept Tarn busy.

Horribly, it seemed Megatron was one of them.

And even more horribly, he'd actually *gotten* everything he thought he had a right to. They'd handed him the Primacy, a pretty figurehead to provide a thin veneer of legitimacy for the same evils the Functionists had practiced. And it had ruined him.

There was no trace of the idealist Optimus had loved in those dimmed, resentful optics. There was only self-righteousness and profound delusion.

"Megatron," he said aloud, and let his deep disappointment be evident in his tone. Megatron's lips pressed together, his optics flickering. It was an unreadable expression.

"Optimus," he said at last, cold. As if Optimus weren't worth his notice.

"I had hoped the two of us could negotiate a peace," Optimus told him, and watched Megatron's mouth twist, a finely-shaped lip lifting to show a razor-sharp fang. As if he still fancied himself a warrior.

"Did you," Megatron said. "And what kind of peace would it be? I doubt it was one we

could accept. Not after Praxus."

"And what of Vos?" Starscream snarled. Megatron glanced at him, back at Optimus, dismissing him.

Optimus wasn't about to let him get away with that. "Yes, Megatron, and what of Vos?"

Megatron's jaw clenched, likely angry about being thwarted. "Our...allies in the effort had their own ideas. The public story was in fact what happened."

"Don't play innocent with me," snarled Starscream. "You meant to kill Vos. You *intended* a genocide."

"And you had already effected one," Megatron said quietly. "We had no intentions of following your lead, Starscream. It was the actions of our allies. Not our own. But I doubt any of you are inclined to believe that." He flicked a glance upward at each face, a cornered turbofox looking for a place to sink his teeth.

"No," said Optimus. "We're not."

"And I'm not inclined to listen to you. Or believe you," Megatron said. He sneered, lifting his head. Optimus sighed inwardly to see his handsome face so distorted, so unlike the mech he'd believed him to be. That he'd hoped Megatron would be, because they *needed* mecha like the mech Optimus had thought he was.

"You were supposed to be our hope," Megatron said, looking Optimus dead in the optic. "You. The Decepticons. Instead, you became our next oppressors. Do you think I wanted to lead the resistance against my own people? The people whose suffering I understand intimately? But the unscrupulous always find new ways to manipulate the most vulnerable. To turn them against their own best interests by pointing out the next enemy. Only, that next enemy is never the person they should be fighting, but someone only a little luckier in circumstances. And as they destroy one another, no one notices the cage closing around them once again. Not until it's too late." He looked at Starscream then, blaming him once again. "And now what? Will you kill me or seek to bleed the Autobots dry in exchange for my return? They won't fall apart without me, if that's what you're hoping for. Another will rise to take my place."

"As always, Megatron, you excel at projecting your own failings on others," said Optimus, when the mech paused long enough to vent. He kept his voice stern. Betraying his own rage would only play into Megatron's hands. "You'll be treated in accordance with all prisoner-of-war laws, before standing trial for the destruction of Vos." It was likely they might exchange him for captured Decepticon officers or territory, but he didn't want Megatron assuming he'd get out of it.

Megatron said nothing, only stared past him, mouth set.

"Shall I take him to the detention facility, my lord?" asked Tarn.

Optimus glanced at Megatron's set face. "I'll accompany you," he said, stepping to Megatron's other side and pulling him up by an arm. Megatron cringed from his grasp; for all his strength, for all his posturing and pretty, reproachful speeches, he was a coward when his own neck was on the line. Tarn took his other arm. Optimus felt another shudder run through the mech.

"I once admired you," Optimus told him. "I am ashamed at my naivete."

"You're not alone," said Tarn. "I, too, once believed he would lead us into a better world. Now, however, his nature is clear to me. He is too weak, too self-indulgent."

Megatron turned his helm away, his shoulders hunching. Curious; Tarn's reproaches had chastised him in a way Optimus's did not. Optimus dared the question he hadn't asked before. "You knew him?"

Tarn's mask turned to him, optics a dull, saddened glow. "He knew me as Terminus."

Between them, Megatron was silent. Optimus glanced at him, then at Tarn. "Then I am truly sorry. We have both of us been deceived."

Tarn nodded. "I am grieved, yes. But you—you have made something of your grief." He caught Optimus's optics and held them. "You've taken his place. You're doing the job he refused. I am yours, Lord Optimus, because you are the one willing to serve the cause he abandoned."

Optimus hesitated, touched beyond measure by the confidence in Tarn's voice. "I will do my best to earn your praise," he said.

"And you'll fail," rasped Megatron between them, but it was feeble, resentful, the thoughtless savaging of a weakened mechanimal, and neither Optimus nor Tarn paid it any mind.

Megatron allowed himself to be dragged, deciding he would happily sacrifice his dignity if it meant inconveniencing the fraggers, as Tarn and Optimus's conversation lysed at his spark.

Even after what Tarn had done to him, it *hurt* to hear the disdain in his voice. Optimus he knew. Optimus had already been cruel to him once, and he could brace for it, but Tarn...

Trepan had promised to take Terminus from him. To turn him into a monster that Megatron would have to kill, and it hurt that Trepan had succeeded. It was easier by far to look up at Tarn's face and see another cruel trick of Trepan's than to see Terminus there, even if it did spur a deep grief at the idea of Trepan winning so. But it wasn't accurate. Megatron knew full well that what he'd felt in Tarn's spark wasn't all Trepan's work. That he could not think of Tarn as a shell hiding the mech he'd loved, that they couldn't think of Tarn and Terminus wrestling for dominion of Tarn's spark. Tarn was one entity. Tarn was Terminus, and Terminus's rage at the side Megatron had chosen, Terminus's feelings of possession of who Megatron was, his determination to make Megatron who he was *supposed to be*, the mech who Terminus *had decided* he ought to be, were no product of Trepan's meddling.

In both these mecha, he had chosen and trusted unwisely, and his plating all but cringed from their hands on his arms, rough, presumptuous.

Both had decided that his protests didn't matter over what they wanted. Optimus had violated his mind. Tarn, his spark and frame. Now, hanging between the two of them, Megatron's tanks lurched at what they might do to him when alone and unwatched.

Optimus would need an excuse. Tarn—Tarn had already demonstrated that he did not. Tarn might even give Optimus *reason*...

Megatron squeezed his optics shut, fighting down the fear. He couldn't let them see it. And he couldn't allow himself to make mistakes because of it. Jazz had been clear when giving high-ranking officers their hostage training; he was not to antagonize them, he was to try to not let his mind do their work for them. Stay alive. Stay calm. Someone will come for you.

Primus, he never wanted Jazz risking capture again!

They'd elected to drag him through the middle of the Decepticon base. He still knew the

layout, he could still find the medical bay and the little box of a room he'd shared with Ratchet, and he knew many of the mecha staring at him with hate. He knew the jeering voices. He'd saved some of their lives. Primus, he knew what the insides of their fragging *fuel tanks* looked like.

Traitor. Coward. Murderer. Spawn of Mortilis. Crude speculation as to his reasons for defecting.

Optimus, usually so discouraging about any sort of criticism, was silent. Tarn's grip tightened; Megatron was sure he felt it was well deserved, that the public humiliation was only just.

He stared blankly at the ground as they dragged him deep into the base, down the same corridor Optimus and Starscream had hauled him to give him to Soundwave. They'd done some work; it deserved the name detention facility rather than moldy basement. He didn't say so. He wanted their attention *off* him.

They stopped at a cell. Megatron tensed, but all they did was march him in, open his cuffs, and leave him, collar still active and buzzing against his neck cables. He turned, hoping to make some try at an escape, but the containment field snapped into being too quickly.

He stared at both of them. No words came, though he was sure there should be many, insults, cutting observations. But none of them would get what he wanted, their attention off him and off him now.

They left. He stood still, waiting as their footsteps faded, as the corridor was dark once more with only the light of the containment field to keep him company, and only when he was really sure he was alone did he find a corner, put his back to one wall and his flank to the other, hunched up with his knees pulled tight to his chest and a hand over the back of his neck. He could watch the corridor like this. At least he'd have a little warning, for all the good it would do him.

Chapter 91

"Report," said Jazz. Prowl was still working at the recordings from the hotel, so this meeting was on him. "Dominus, you and Tyrest having any luck?"

"Still working on opening diplomatic channels," said Dominus. "Megatron's capture seems to have taken much of Decepticon command by surprise; our usual contacts didn't know what we were talking about when we first approached them. This points either at an operation that only the highest echelons of Decepticon high command were aware of, or a crime of opportunity."

"Our contacts seem unsure if they have authorization to negotiate with us," Tyrest added. "Our last conversation indicated they'd be seeking approval to continue the dialogue."

"Well, so much for the diplomatic solution," said Jazz. "Prowl's getting us more intel on the bot who nabbed Megatron. Spec-ops' angle is, of course classified, but we're workin' on it. Thunderclash, how's stuff going militarily speaking?"

"Megatron's capture is a blow to morale," Thunderclash said. He looked around the table. "I know few of us are particularly religious, but with newer recruits, especially high-ranked military and household guards from Iaconian noble houses, having a Prime on our side has been a uniting factor. Autobots who've been with us since the beginning love Megatron for himself; the newer recruits love him because he's Prime—and because he's nontraditional enough to put himself at risk. His capture has frightened them. If," and Thunderclash had to actually reset his vocalizer before he said it, which made Jazz like the mech a little better, "if the Decepticons decide to kill him..."

"We will have to push the martyr angle and hard," Jazz said quickly. "We can't let his death undermine us. For one thing, it would torque him off."

There was scattered laughter that was more nervous than amused.

"Also that's not gonna happen," he added, for good measure. "Go on, Thunderclash."

"We're continuing the offensive based out of Praxus," said Thunderclash. "We've pushed them back."

Jazz nodded. "Recent chatter indicates you're getting attention from Decepticon High Command there, Thunders. I'm sending some of our," everyone knew he meant spec-ops, "folks out there right now, just in case we can bag us one of the 'Con VIPs. That'll make Dominus and Tyrest's lives easier."

"Thank you."

Jazz turned his attention to Ratchet, who hadn't spoken the whole time and was staring blankly into his midgrade. He wondered, briefly, if it would be worth it to tell First Aid to pull medical rank on the mech, just to get him to sleep. "How're we doing on the medical front, Ratchet?"

Ratchet came back to himself with a jolt, glancing around guiltily. It was a moment before he said, "We're making progress. Still sort on fine-motor parts, so we're still short on some replacements. Especially hands. Not great on parts to repair elbows or ankles, either. We can keep people alive, but we're gonna have to start giving some of 'em claws if this keeps up."

"All right. We'll see about working on that." Jazz glanced around. "Anyone got anythin' else to add?"

Silence. "Right. Same time tomorrow."

They filed out, though Ratchet lagged behind. Jazz stopped him. "Hey, Ratch? Don't blame yourself."

"How couldn't I?" said Ratchet, not looking at him. "I should have told him—"

"You weren't there," said Jazz. "He didn't get grabbed out from under your nasal ridge. It's not on you."

"I *encouraged him to go*," said Ratchet, miserably.

Yeah, but I left him. "You didn't know what Tarn had turned into."

Ratchet closed his optics. "He deserved better, dammit."

"I'm not gonna argue with you on that," said Jazz. "But we're gonna get him back, Ratch. I promise. Go get some rest. He'll probably want to see you when he gets back."

Ratchet shook his head. "If there's one thing the last few years has taught me, things never turn out that nicely."

But he didn't argue further and he went. Jazz watched him until he turned the corner toward the medical facilities, and then went to go check on Prowl.

"The Autobots are trying to open negotiations," said Starscream. "Do we let them?"

"It wouldn't hurt to see what they're willing to offer us," Optimus said, after having paused to consider it. "But...I wish we could see Megatron answer for *something*, at least. Have to stand up there and admit to what he did in Vos. What he did to the Decepticons, instead of making us the villains in his own private tragedy."

"We don't have to say yes," said Starscream. "Or hand him over."

"He doesn't deserve mercy," Tarn put in, optics bright. Megatron's betrayal, it seemed, still cut him to the spark. Optimus looked sadly at both of them.

"I do not wish to appear to be acting in bad faith," he said. "The Decepticons have enough trouble garnering respect as it is. We need legitimacy, Starscream, Tarn. Megatron was smart, to go to Iacon first. We need something similar."

Starscream glanced at Tarn, who stood stiff with anger, before he reacted. "True," he said, wings drooping. Optimus put a bracing hand on his shoulder, trying to ignore the way Starscream looked at him hopefully as soon as he did—he'd made the mistake of courting Megatron, he didn't want Starscream getting similar notions.

"Leadership requires sacrifice," he told Starscream. "We both want Megatron to answer for his crimes, but if handing him back saves Decepticon lives, that's a message we must send to our people and to the world; we will not leave them behind, no matter the sacrifice. That holds a movement together. Primus willing, there will come a day when Megatron will answer for his crimes before all of Cybertron, and none of our brethren will suffer for it—for there will *be* no

Autobots to threaten them."

"Well, that's a noble dream," said Starscream. "Let's hope we get the chance to make it happen."

"We will, my friend," said Optimus. "We will. And we'll start here." He tapped the outskirts of Praxus on the strategy table. "The Autobots are massing for an attack here. I'm planning to go out to meet them. To show them just how much they need their Prime leading them, if they hope to stand against us."

That got a real smile out of Starscream. "Looking forward to it, Lord Optimus. I'll get my Seekers ready."

It was easier going back to Praxus than Bluestreak had anticipated. Probably because he was here to kill Decepticons.

He'd found the perfect place to wait a day ago, and had spent the interceding time delicately shifting himself into position, rippling a plate of armor at a time, getting the rifle set up just right. Now he was waiting. There was a bombed-out shell of a building around him, protecting him. Now he needed to make sure no one knew he was here until he'd done the job he was here to do.

He'd been on his way before he'd heard about Megatron's capture. He'd also heard some of Decepticon High Command might be dropping by for a visit. He hoped so.

Prowl and the others probably wanted a prisoner to try and swap for Megatron. That was... nice. But mecha who did things like Praxus didn't leave prisoners in a fit state to exchange. Megatron was already dead, Bluestreak was certain, or he was wishing for death. Rescue was out of the question; all they could do for Megatron now was revenge him.

Bluestreak lay still, waiting, with a control that no one who'd known him before Praxus burned would have thought him capable of. The time in the rubble had taught him in the most brutal way imaginable, and the lesson, as brutal ones so often did, had stuck. Oh, sure, he'd acted like the mech from before when he was in the base, but it had been just that. An act. Chattering, flighty, happy. He was none of those things now, and if he had to wait for a week, just like this, he would wait for a week. Just like this. Waiting for the perfect shot.

Waiting for a revenge he hoped would put him back together again. For Praxus.

For Megatron.

For the mech Bluestreak wished he could go back to being.

"So they got Megatron," said Deadlock, and spat on the floor for good measure. "Hope they string him up by his fuel tank, after what he did. Fragging traitor."

"I'm looking forward to helping with that," said Pharma, by the far end of the table. Deadlock curled a lip to bare his fangs at the mech. Megatron might be a disgusting bit of work, but he still gave a frag about Ratchet, and Pharma was *slime*. "Wasn't talking to you."

"Weren't you, though," said Pharma coldly, and turned his attention back to his drink. The rest of the 'cons at the table with Deadlock left him alone; a few messy murders and they'd generally accepted him.

"Heard we were attacking the Autobot base at Praxus," said someone down the table. "Are you going with them?"

Deadlock looked down the table, spotting the single blue optic and the red-and-orange paintjob immediately. He almost wanted to groan. Glitch needed a fraggin' repaint before someone stopped being afraid of him making them well, glitch, as soon as they touched him and beat the scrap out of him. For all that he seemed glued to a datapad with something or other of Optimus's writings on it, he looked like a fragging Autobot like that. "Dunno. I'll find out when Optimus tells me."

He'd finished his ration. Deadlock put the cube down and stalked away. Optimus had better let him come along. He wasn't sure he wanted to look Megatron in the optic again, not after everything the mech had done. He didn't like Tarn. He hated Pharma. Starscream wasn't good news. Turmoil needed to get dead fast.

This was supposed to be a noble cause. So why the frag was it so lousy with absolute crankcases?

At least when he asked Optimus to let him fight, Optimus listened. Probably knew it was a choice between Deadlock getting to rip out Autobot sparks, or he'd take it out on the Decepticons around him.

"I have discovered more of how Megatron was kidnapped," Prowl greeted Jazz in their quarters, a datapad in one hand. His wings were lowered into a flat, stressed line. They looked like they ached; Jazz wanted to massage them but was pretty sure he'd lose a hand. "I...have qualms about sharing this with you, because it's a major violation of Megatron's privacy. But the footage shows Tarn's talent in action, and I think you need to see it before you and the extraction team proceed."

"So they were fragging," said Jazz, resigned.

"They were fragging," said Prowl, and guided him back to the couch. "Here, watch. It's after they'd first been intimate. Important to note, according to the room's audio, Megatron had made it clear he wasn't interested in a passive, submissive role."

Jazz swallowed hard. He didn't like where this was going. He extra didn't like how Prowl felt it was necessary to show him this. But there was only so much he could glean from Prowl's report alone—Prowl might have missed things that he'd pick up on. He had to see it himself.

Primus, this would feel so much less *wrong* if it weren't for their feelings for Megatron.

"Tarn initially agreed, and yet, here the interaction changes completely—with no explicit agreement from Megatron."

Jazz shifted his weight as Prowl offered him the datapad, saying, "Watch. The interaction changes here." He skipped ahead in the footage. "Megatron goes from active to—dazed, it seems. As soon as Tarn starts talking the second time."

Jazz frowned at the scene. "Tarn taking the lead despite Megatron telling him no earlier."

"Megatron's optics unfocus here. Body language has been give and take this whole time but here—"

"Makes himself small, submissive, and starts mirroring Tarn."

"Stops talking."

They looked at each other. Then back at the screen. Then at each other again, both sets of doorwings slowly hiking with anger.

"You're thinking what I'm thinking, aren't you."

"We know Tarn has some special ability connected to his voice," said Prowl. "I think we're seeing it."

"And that this encounter stopped being consensual about twenty minutes in." Jazz looked unhappily at the screen again, hating to watch Megatron being manipulated like a doll. At least this put paid to the rumor that Megatron had defected, somehow gone with Tarn willingly. This wasn't a betrayal, not that he'd suspected it; it was a rape.

He should have checked sooner. He should have been there for him.

He didn't want to be watching this.

Primus, he'd known Tarn was dangerous. He'd know the fragger could do something with his voice. But watching Megatron's defenses broken down, Megatron toyed with and used... that was a new kind of terrifying. And sickening.

Jazz *knew* Megatron, the mech's charisma, determination, his pride. He doubted Megatron would forgive either of them for knowing what Tarn had done to him.

But he'd spent too long as an enforcer to indulge that thinking, and so had Prowl. They had to get him back, and Prowl was right; he couldn't go in without knowing what Tarn could do. They had to know what had happened in that room. The audio from this would have to be analyzed, examined to see if anything might be detected. If Tarn's voice could be understood, it might be countered.

That meant a lot more people would have to see this, for the sake of saving lives, if nothing else. That was the business they were in, no matter how they felt about watching this. About how Jazz felt about this. He couldn't have Megatron's life outweigh that of their Autobots. He couldn't go in to rescue Megatron with incomplete information because he was too squeamish about what Tarn had done. Because he was afraid of Megatron's reaction to him knowing this. That would have been neglecting his duty to Megatron because of his own feelings.

Even if he felt the purge roll up in the back of his intakes when Megatron opened his spark to that slagger. When he saw the horror appear on Megatron's face. Sparks couldn't lie.

"We're gonna get you back," he said aloud. Prowl glanced at him, nodded.

"If you can, make sure that Tarn is neutralized as well," he said.

"Yeah," said Jazz. "I'm gonna neutralize him so hard his own frame designer wouldn't recognize him."

He straightened up. "Intel says Optimus is headed for Praxus," he said. "That should be a nice big noisy distraction. Mirage and I are leaving tomorrow with the rest of our team. We'll get him home, don't worry."

"And Optimus just opened negotiations for him," said Prowl. "We'll see what we can do, though it's much better if he's rescued without us having to make concessions."

Jazz smiled. "That's what spec-ops is here for. Save us a bundle on concessions." He sobered, still sick at the pit of his spark after seeing that. "Prowl... We're gonna get him back, you know that, right?"

"Yes," said Prowl, in that certain way of his, and Jazz forced himself to believe it. Please Primus, would nothing else go wrong.

Bluestreak was waiting.

There. Far below. Red and blue. He watched. Waited. Until he was certain.

Optimus, Lord of the Decepticons.

Optimus, the murderer of Praxus.

Optimus, leading a charge against the Autobot forces. Bluestreak's friends. Everyone he had left in the world.

Optimus, who had bombed the roads into Praxus so Bluestreak had lain in the rubble and listened to the newbuilds die around him, listened to the mecha who had once trained him, when he'd been a newbuild, die around him. Had survived by licking droplets of energon from his one free hand. He'd never asked where it had come from.

Optimus, who had killed him, and now had Megatron.

Optimus, who would pay.

Bluestreak didn't need to steady himself. He was steady. He waited.

When the time was right, he squeezed the trigger.

Far below, Optimus fell.

Chapter 92

"Will he live?"

"Optimus? He's a tough mech." Pharma thumped the outside of the CR tank. "The medical team, and by that I mean me, is going to have its work cut out for it, but we'll have him up and about soon enough. Shockwave has a few ideas, but he'll need me to implement them." He transformed out a hand, flicking it through several modes. Showing off, Starscream thought sourly. "Anyway, you're going to be in command for a while, Starscream."

"Obviously," said Starscream, adjusting his wings. He...had expected this would feel better. More like an achievement. Mostly, though, he was angry.

He hadn't been done with Optimus yet. How dare the Autobots take him?

"So," said Pharma. "What does this mean for our esteemed guest? You still going to exchange him after the Autobots tried to murder our leader?"

"We're discussing it," said Starscream coldly.

"I wouldn't presume to dictate," said Pharma. "Only... if you decide to exact a little payback, Megatron's the mech who poisoned my conjunx's mind against me. I'd be happy to put all of my considerable skills at your disposal."

Starscream liked that idea more than he wanted to admit. He sniffed. "I'll consider it."

"That's all I ask." Pharma bowed low, mocking, and stood aside.

Tarn caught up to him right outside the door. Starscream huffed in irritation. "I'm sorry, is there a sign on my back saying 'open to advice'? Because I'm *not*."

Tarn raised his hands and shrugged a little, but the intensity of his stare undermined any sense of apology Starscream might have otherwise gotten from him. "We need to talk about Megatron."

"No, Soundwave and I need to talk about Megatron. You don't need to." Starscream folded his arms and glared at Tarn. "You and Optimus might have shared some kind of bond because what, you've both stuck your spikes in that idiot Megatron?" Tarn reared back with a hiss of vents and a narrowing of optics—apparently he hadn't known what Megatron had been up to while he'd been dead. Starscream smirked. "But I'm not Optimus. I see no good reason you should be involved here."

"I know him." Tarn leaned in. "I *made* him. I shaped his work, his *thinking*, I disseminated it to Cybertron, I crafted what he *was*. Peace through tyranny? It was Megatron's fingers that wrote it, but I was the one who shaped the idea in his mind. No, I know the Decepticon Cause better than *anyone*, because I was there at its beginning, and of the two of us? I didn't *betray* it."

"Claiming you know the cause better than I do isn't exactly persuading me to trust you," said Starscream, with a glare.

"Then try this," said Tarn. "The Matrix of Leadership. Megatron carries it, and with it, the legitimacy of a Prime. That's the only thing holding his Autobots together. If he lost it, if he lost the divine blessing of Primus? His "friends", the mecha he imagines his confidants, would abandon

him in a sparkbeat. If we gave it to Optimus, they'd have to go to him. They've always loved strength, and they'll love the Lord of the Decepticons better than a miner with delusions of grandeur and a soft spark." Tarn began walking, circling him as he stood stock still, thinking about that. "Optimus. You know him well." Tarn's voice lowered to a confiding rumble. "You know he can be steered. Who's the true Prime, then, the mech with the Matrix in his chest... or you, Starscream? *I know* who runs the Decepticons. It's not Lord Optimus. It's you. And you're the embodiment of the perfect warrior, the perfect Decepticon. You killed the Senate, Starscream. You ended the Functionists. And for that, you have my allegiance and unending respect. Now do this one thing more. Destroy the Prime and raise a new one, a *worthy* one, in his place—but above all, a *malleable* Prime."

Starscream glanced at him. Tarn had to be lying; the mask would be a good way of hiding it. But he wasn't wrong, and Starscream's spark sang with the praise. Someone knew. Someone had *noticed!*

"What are you proposing?"

"If we take the Matrix from Megatron, it will likely kill him. We'll have to hide that. Death during interrogation, resisting Soundwave? Maybe he suicided, to avoid that." Tarn chuckled softly. "No one who knows him would disbelieve *that*."

Starscream thought of Megatron screaming and sobbing as Soundwave approached, before Soundwave had touched him. No one *would* disbelieve that.

"We can...traditionally interrogate him, to start with," Tarn said. "Soften him up. Make him *afraid*. Make it more believable. Especially if we return the corpse. It'll make us look good—regret that he fought us, incurred the injuries during an escape attempt, died by his own servo rather than face Soundwave, and yet here we are doing the decent thing that the Autobots most certainly would not for our own..." He tilted his head to the other side, thinking. "Megatron fighting us wildly, stupidly, would fit with the nobility's impression of him—a barely tamed mechanical. They'd be glad to have Optimus after that. At least Optimus comes from something respectable. But Megatron? He was a miner. You know what they say about the lower classes."

"You just want to torture him," said Starscream.

Tarn chuckled again, a soft, sinister sound that sent cold up Starscream's spinal strut. "I've always enjoyed him in pain." His head tilted. "He's much less pretentious. Good company, even."

Starscream raised a hand. "Enough. Whatever perverted fantasies you have about our greatest *enemy*? I don't need that slag in my processor. We torture him. Then what?"

"I kill him. It'll look like a suicide, the evidence my voice leaves. We take the Matrix, and we make Optimus a Prime."

"And rally all of Cybertron to us," said Starscream, thinking of the fawning idiots he knew the upper classes to be. Safety, wealth—they were parasites, and parasites always wanted the biggest, strongest host. Optimus Prime would take away their last defense, their last excuse not to join with the Decepticons. "Very well, Tarn. Your proposal is...accepted." He smiled, as poisonous as he could. "But will you have the dedication to carry this out? From the way he spoke of you, it seems you loved him."

Tarn went still once more. After a time, he said, "I'd prefer him dead in my arms than alive and betraying everything we fought for."

Well, that answered that. "I see. I'm sure I'll enjoy working with you."

Jazz, Mirage, and the rest of the infiltration team weren't quite into Decepticon territory when the comm from Prowl came through.

Jazz used the handheld holoprojector so the rest of the team could listen in. Prowl's doorwings were flat and stressed, a posture Jazz had never seen him show in a public setting like this.

"The Decepticons just closed diplomatic channels," Prowl told them. "Starscream's orders. It's retaliation."

"Retaliation for *what*?" demanded Jazz.

Prowl took a sharp vent. *"Optimus. Optimus was shot last night by an Autobot sniper. We're still not sure who, and we're not sure if he's dead or not. But it's likely he'll be out of commission for a while."*

"Oh frag," said Jazz. Mirage, who knew about as much of the inner workings of Decepticon High Command as he did, sucked in a sharp breath.

"You're the only way we'll get him back," said Prowl. "Optimus's death has made them completely uninterested in a prisoner exchange. And they're going to want revenge."

"Got it," said Jazz, and wondered, briefly, if Prowl had any idea of who'd replace Megatron if they didn't manage to rescue him. "We'll bring him home."

Prowl nodded and cut the transmission. Jazz looked at Mirage.

"Frag," said Mirage, absolutely sparkfelt. It just yanked at Jazz's spark all the more; Mirage had barely sworn before he'd had to shepherd Megatron through Iaconian high society. He'd even picked up some of Megatron's inflection, even though his voice was a light tenor compared with Megatron's bass growl. They were going to do their damndest, but they were headed into the heart of Decepticon territory. It was all too likely they weren't going to get to Megatron in time. Jazz was very, very afraid he was never going to hear Megatron's growl again. "They're going to tear him to pieces."

"Little ones," Jazz agreed morosely. "Come on, team. You heard the mech. Megatron's counting on us. We *have* to get to him in time."

And hope whatever parts of him they pulled off can be replaced.

The fear had only kept Megatron preoccupied for the first day or so; the dull ache of horror from what Terminus—Tarn had *done* to him had faded to background radiation. Still, it had taken him a long time to uncurl from his corner, as if he could see the fear and horror crouching at the edge of his vision, ready to tear him apart when he moved. If he acknowledged them.

He'd been pleasantly surprised when they fueled him. He'd been expecting a long, unpleasant build to a session with Soundwave, underfueling and maybe some torture, to keep it interesting. But it seemed they'd mostly forgotten him.

Or events outside were dramatic enough to keep the attention off him.

Either way, he didn't like it.

But...could Prowl and Jazz have done it? Started negotiations? Maybe they'd be able to get him out, and soon, without the usual unpleasantness. They were certainly competent. They were certainly brilliant officers. Maybe, just maybe they'd come up with something.

But he was deep in Decepticon territory. It wasn't *fair* to put that kind of hope on Jazz and Prowl. It would be better that they carry on without him. That was a hope he could put on them, and the gnawing dullness at the edges of his spark made it easier. To have Terminus back, and then yanked away again, to know Terminus *hated* him now...

He'd spent years remembering Terminus, hoping to honor his memory. Feeling foolish and guilty for allowing Optimus any place in his spark. Feeling that he couldn't allow another a place there, after the enormity of his error with Optimus. Terminus had been the one mech he was meant to be with. No other. He'd resigned himself to Terminus's death, to accepting that he could allow no one, not even Jazz and Prowl, to even approach that place in his spark. That romantic affection was something reserved only for Terminus, a shrine in himself that could never be taken from him, never be destroyed, because Terminus should have been his first and only love. Terminus had allowed Megatron to sacrifice him, for both the cause, and Megatron's own conscience. His own sense of self. Because if he *hadn't* sacrificed Terminus, his Primacy would have been a living death in Trepan's hands.

He'd blamed himself for his relationship with Optimus. If it could even be called that, something purely carnal and a bandage on the wound Terminus's death had left. Even Optimus, taking up his cause second-hand, couldn't approach Terminus, their bond, his sacrifice.

But now...now that shrine was shattered by Terminus's own hand, and Terminus was Tarn, and all that affection had been transmuted by betrayal into rage. And seeing that, *feeling* that in his own *spark*—that made it easier to contemplate someone else leading the Autobots. That made it easier to resign himself to his own death, because in a way it was a simpler thing to face than living with what Tarn had done to him. Someone else could take his place. It had been true of every other Prime, why not him?

He felt such a fool for turning Jazz and Prowl down. He was fond of them, they were kind, and competent, and had seen him at his weakest and didn't yet hate him for it. What else could any sane mech want? He wanted someone—his foolishness in trusting Tarn made that very clear.

But if Jazz and Prowl could forgive his foolishness, could forgive him blithely throwing himself into enemy arms so soon after refusing them, they were better mecha than most.

He didn't want Autobot lives risked to retrieve him from his own terrible mistake. Better that they leave him here. He didn't want them trying to save him out of some sense of duty to him.

He wished he were strong enough not to be afraid for himself. But what Tarn had done had set a weakness in his spark, and when he heard footsteps in the corridor outside, he had to fight the impulse to retreat into his corner. Cold dread wrapped icy fingers around his fuel pump and spark; the best he could do was freeze in the center of his cell, resetting his vocalizer.

It was Tarn and Starscream, staring at him through the containment field, the bars between them like gashes in plating.

"He won't come to us," said Tarn, hideously sure of himself. He pulled a small remote from

under his plating. Megatron had only a moment to realize it was for the collar before he was shocked and found himself flat on his face in the cell. Tarn stepped in, snapped the stasis cuffs onto him while he was still twitching.

He looked blearily up at Starscream, even as his tank flopped sickly at Tarn being right there, *touching him*, his own terror at what the mech might do to him drying his intake. "Where's Optimus?"

"One of your little slagers thought it would be a good idea to kill him," growled Starscream. Megatron stared at him, shocked. Then he forced a smile, though it was more a baring of dentae.

"See?" he said. "They don't need me. You thought capturing me would win the war, didn't you? It won't. They're still fighting, Tarn. And they're not going to stop."

"No," said Tarn, dragging him upright. "They don't need you. They need this."

His hand clawed into Megatron's chestplates, and Megatron flinched back with a hiss, spark beating frantically, sick with the memory of the last time Tarn had touched him there. But it meant he flinched back against Tarn's chestplating.

"They need a Prime. They need to think God is on their side." Tarn leaned in to speak into his audial, his mask pressing against Megatron's helmet and cheek. Megatron tried to look at him, could only see a red optic and a sliver of his mask. "And we will take that from him."

"My murder will only make them fight harder," Megatron said. "You're signing your own death warrant, Tarn."

Tarn's claws settled over his neck. "You sound remarkably happy with that, for someone who once professed to love me."

"Enough with the history," snapped Starscream. "Let's get on with it."

They dragged him out of the cell and down the corridor. Megatron tried to keep his face still, to seem indifferent, but it was hard. It was still harder knowing Tarn knew all his tells, knew him intimately, had known him both as he had been before Trepan, and at his very lowest, his mind mutilated by the shadowplay, made something helpless, afraid, compliant. What could he hope to hide from such a mech?

They dragged him into another room, shocked him again and while he was curled over himself, recovering, detached the stasis cuffs and shackled him on his knees with his arms outstretched to either side. The height of the cuffs was a little low, so he was kept perpetually bent. It offered his back and aft to whoever was behind him, and the vulnerability of the position made his plating shift uneasily.

The door opened and Soundwave stepped into the room.

Megatron glanced at him, then away, fighting the wave of terror that threatened to swamp him. Ratchet had done the surgery, they knew it worked, he was safe. But he jerked violently all the same as Soundwave's hands settled to either side of his face, urging him to meet the spymaster's visor.

"Megatron: advised not to resist," Soundwave said. Megatron tried to jerk away, couldn't. But there was something off in Soundwave's manner, almost as if he didn't want to be here either.

Soundwave leaned in. "Megatron: advised not to resist," he repeated, and then, in a murmur, "Tarn and Starscream: looking for an excuse. Soundwave: does not want Megatron destroyed."

Megatron sneered at him. "You chose the wrong side for scruples, Soundwave," he said, and used Soundwave's momentary distraction to slam the prow of his helm into the other mech's face. Soundwave reeled, faceplate and visor both cracked, recovered himself and clamped both hands on Megatron's helm.

Megatron closed his optics and prepared to fight.

To his shock, he felt nothing. He opened his optics, watching Soundwave. The other mech was pressing on his helm hard, trembling with effort. Megatron couldn't make out much of his face, but the dim, flickering glow of Soundwave's optics behind his visor made the other mech's frantic shock clear.

He began to laugh, low.

What the Decepticons had thought they'd had on him? They'd never have again.

Soundwave withdrew. "Megatron's course of action: unwise," he said. He stood. "Starscream: Megatron impervious to telepathy. Other methods of persuasion: recommended."

"Do what you like to me," said Megatron. Soundwave's failure had heartened him, and the dread of what Starscream and Tarn might do faded by comparison. "I won't betray my Autobots."

Tarn and Starscream both turned to look at him.

"Oh, Megatron," said Starscream, and pulled a barbed whip from his subspace, handing it to Tarn. "You're going to regret that."

Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

and another chapter warning for this chapter, though I'm pretty sure all of you saw that coming.

The whip cracked down on Megatron's back. He grunted with the impact, the barbs tearing into his plating and substructure. He knew better than to hope Tarn would get tired, would stop, would show anything resembling mercy.

He lowered his helm and grit his dentae. He was no stranger to pain. He wasn't going to buckle because of it. The way his spark ached after what Tarn had done to him—that was something else entirely, and something that completely overrode any mere physical discomfort. The way Tarn hesitated between each, that was bad too. He knew it wasn't regret. He knew the look in Tarn's optics so well, from happier times, when pain was something shared willingly. But right now, having this *savored*...

He counted the strokes instead of thinking about it, lost count when one landed across an existing cut, gouging still deeper. He hung in the chains and just existed, tried to let the pain flow over and through him. He could hear his plating rattle, could hear Starscream's frustration, the huff of Tarn's ventilations. He hadn't screamed yet, he realized, and was distantly pleased with himself. In a break in the pain, he heard Starscream cursing Tarn for it. It was almost funny.

Starscream kicked him hard in the interface paneling, and the world came crashing back into focus as they shifted from the flogging to beating him. Perhaps, he thought, there wasn't any more plating left on his back, and that was why they'd switched. It certainly felt that way.

Maybe they'd accidentally kill him.

After a time, nebulous and terrible, the fresh assault of pain stopped.

"This doesn't seem to be getting through to you," said Tarn. Megatron gave him the most disdainful look he could manage. One side of his mouth was swelling from an earlier blow, so he was sure some of the effect was lost.

"Yes, it's almost as if I've been through worse," he sneered.

Tarn's optics flared behind his mask. He moved quickly to Megatron's side, and a clawed thumb pressed hovered over an optic. Megatron forced himself to stare steadily back, not closing it, not showing fear.

"You'll change your mind soon, I'm sure," purred Tarn, and the thumb stabbed down. Megatron managed to strangle the scream in his throat, turn it into a horrified gasp. *Not as bad as the Matrix*, he told himself, as delicate components crunched, as optic fluid burst and ran down his cheek. *Not as bad as the Matrix, not nearly as bad*, because it wasn't anything like them boiling and bursting as they had then, but there was a new terror to this, Tarn's thumb in his fragging optic socket, hooking hard and pulling.

Megatron offlined his vocalizer so Tarn wouldn't hear the scream. He felt the optic connector stretch, agony, and rip.

He sagged in the chains, shaking.

"Now," said Tarn, "shall we do the other one?"

"Tarn," it was Starscream, and Megatron was unbelievably glad to hear the hesitant note in the Seeker's voice. "You're going to run out of optics. This obviously isn't working."

"Oh? And would you happen to have something better?" Tarn's hand settled on the top of his helm, fingers tickling down to the back of his neck. Megatron shuddered, knowing it was absolutely intentional.

"Yes," said Starscream, sneering. "I do have something much better."

There was a pause in the pain, in Tarn's attention on him. Megatron screwed his remaining optic shut—the cover on the other side wasn't working anymore, nothing but pain was from that side—and waited.

The door slid open. A familiar laugh invaded the room. Megatron's head snapped up, and he jerked back against his restraints as Pharma looked down at him.

"I need his hands in front of him and steady," Pharma said, still grinning.

"Is that necessary?" asked Starscream, as Tarn scoffed.

"He needs to watch," said Pharma. "Come on, you wanted my help? Then you're going to have to listen to me. I mean, there's only a few dozen things I need to do that aren't providing you with entertainment for the afternoon."

A heavy metal table thumped down in front of Megatron's face. He glanced upward to see Tarn standing there, impassive.

There were manacles welded to the table's surface.

"*Thank* you," said Pharma, impatient. He unlocked one of the stasis cuffs from the field holding it in place. "You might want to weigh that down more. He's going to struggle."

Tarn growled a complaint, but did something to the base of the table that drew an approving nod from Pharma.

Then Pharma looked into Megatron's face. "One at a time," he said, grinning, and pulled out what Megatron mistook for a medical kit.

Then he opened it.

Megatron tried to jerk away, but between the arm still suspended behind him and the heft of the table, managed to go nowhere.

"You certainly did a thorough job getting him warmed up," said Pharma, laying out a series of little tools, many of which Megatron did know, little probes and saws and plating retractors, the delicate ones for working on small, highly articulated joints, "but at the end of the day... I'm a medic. I know how to really hurt a mech." He looked at Megatron directly again. "Especially one who wants to be a medic. Oh, I know, you're busy being Prime—but I did teach you some things. I

did see how you act. You want it still. You want it more than *anything*. You'd give up that bauble in your chest in a *sparkbeat* if it meant you could pass your exams, become the medic he wants you to be." He leaned in. "If you could give Ratchet that. That final *success*. Oh, I know the two of you are fragging, Megatron. You just want to be perfect for him, don't you? I know I wanted it. Advance warning: *it won't be enough*."

"We're not all in love with the sound of your voice, Pharma," said Starscream. "Get on with it."

Pharma pulled out a few clear vials and a syringe, laying them all out neatly. "It's part of the procedure," he said. "What makes a medic, Starscream?"

Starscream shrugged. "The right uploads?"

"His *hands*," said Pharma, and took one of Megatron's fingers between his own. He lifted the plating retractor. "These are *packed* full of sensors. And you can't build them. Only Forged mecha have the right hands to do good surgeries. The only reason Megatron here's been any good is the Matrix reformat."

"Shuttlescrap," growled Tarn. Megatron, already guessing what Pharma meant to do, tried to jerk his finger out of the other mech's grasp and couldn't. Nausea bubbled in his tanks, a hyperawareness of Pharma's fingers on his own. The last breaths before the pain, the last moments he had before agony. The anticipation was terrible. It was better than what was coming.

He felt like his very plating was cringing from Pharma's touch, from the evil little device in his hands.

"Hold his head, Tarn. I don't want him turning away," said Pharma. He jammed the retractor under the second joint of Megatron's index finger, and yanked. Megatron hissed as agony exploded up his arm. "You know, a hammer wouldn't be unwelcome here, either. I want to do the delicate damage first, of course. He won't feel it as well after we smash the hand."

Megatron sagged, panting, as soon as the retractor released. There was a gap in the metal of that finger, a steady aching burn, but the damage wasn't actually that bad. Pharma moved to the next.

He slipped the edge of the device under the first joint this time, then met Megatron's frantic optic.

"You're never going to do surgery again, Megatron," he said. "Even my beloved Ratchet won't be able to put these back together when I'm done with you."

Megatron bared his teeth, mastering the sick horror that threatened to swamp him. "Ratchet's better than you think," he said. It was better than staying silent. It meant that even in the face of this, he was still himself and he wasn't afraid.

Pharma yanked again. He hissed with the pain.

"Even Ratchet has limits." Pharma tossed aside the retractor and loaded the syringe. "You know what this is? Here, smell it, like you did in class. You're supposed to be able to identify common corrosives to pass your exams, remember? Not that you're going to be able to do that with *no hands*."

Megatron recognized it. He swallowed hard. Found himself darting a desperate glance at Starscream, who stared down at what Pharma was doing with cool interest. Tarn hadn't even

twitched.

Tarn had been there with him while he'd fought to stay in the academy, fought to be a medic with half his processor mutilated and missing and here he was, just *watching*, as Pharma did this to him. He hadn't realized that he could still feel betrayed, he'd thought he was past that when Tarn had taken his spark. But no, a fresh tide of misery swamped him, and Tarn's hands holding his head in place were solid and unmoving.

Pharma slid the needle under the plating of his fingers with a smooth gesture. Cool flooded his hand.

Then, slowly, it felt warm. Itchy. Prickling.

"You're not good enough to know how concentrated that was," said Pharma. "Let me assure you, it was *very* concentrated. It'll probably eat its way out through your palm. Has it started to hurt yet?"

The itching was beginning to turn to an optic-watering burn. Megatron tried not to think of what was going on under the plating. What that burn meant. What the small wisp of smoke coming from under his wrist plating *meant*. The itching was unbearable now, boiling and hot and the pain was starting. He jerked against the restraint, trying to pull the hand in to his chest and rub at it, like that would help, he thought about the solvent spigots in the labs back at the academy and the lectures, every term, about how to treat a corrosive substance burn.

It was inside of his palm. *Inside*. Even if he had one of those, it would be of limited use.

Pharma grabbed his little finger hard and wrenched, twisting. Megatron screamed before he could stop himself, wires and delicate sensors ripping from their housings. The joint was dislocated, he was sure of it. The soft parts around the strut, that damage was worse.

More pain, as Pharma transformed a finger into a drill and went right through the side of his abused finger. He tried to jerk away but his hand had stopped responding right.

"That would be the acid eating your central motor relay for that hand," said Pharma, and went after the next finger with the drill. Megatron would have tucked his face into his shoulder and hidden his face from it if he could have, if Tarn hadn't been holding him. At least he could close his optics—but that was worse, the growing agony of the acid burn, the jolts of white-hot pain as Pharma did—did what he was doing.

The horror of being mutilated like this was worse than his optic. It was worse than the beating or the flogging or his fear of anything Tarn might do to him and there was nothing he could do to stop it. It wasn't going to stop. He could offer them anything.

"Ratchet's not going to want you after this," said Pharma. "He only wants the best. Who wants an apprentice with broken hands?"

"No," Megatron whispered, and Pharma twisted his hand, looking at the palm, at the fingers.

"Hm. Looks like the acid stayed pretty local. Well, more than one way to do this." He transformed his hand again into a welding torch.

"No!" Megatron jerked, trying to get away, but it was still futile. Pharma brought the welding torch down, slowly, letting him feel the first wash of heat and then the blistering of his paint, then he clamped it over the joint.

Megatron shrieked, a high, helpless noise. The pain flooded his entire world. He was dimly aware of his body twitching and jerking, trying to escape. It was futile. Nothing stopped the pain, nothing he could do, he was completely—

The heat lifted away. Megatron sagged, sobbing, against Tarn. "What do you want?" he whispered, sounding broken to his own audials.

He couldn't give it to them. He couldn't. He couldn't. But he let out a low wail when Pharma powered up the torch again, whimpering before it even touched him. Pharma paused, glanced at Starscream.

"You mistake the situation," said Starscream. "You have nothing we want, Megatron."

"Only your pain," said Tarn, behind him, and Pharma brought the torch down again.

Megatron screamed through it, trying to remember that Ratchet was good, Ratchet was better than Pharma, Ratchet wouldn't get rid of him because of his hands. But it was hard, impossible, the horror of the mutilation as bad as the pain, and he had to bite his glossa not to start pleading the instant Pharma lifted the torch away again, not to thank him for fragging stopping. Pride seemed a very stupid thing in the face of this.

A small, ashamed part of him wondered if he were only retrenching Tarn's disdain for him.

He couldn't really care.

Pharma lifted something new. He couldn't look now, only jerk back and groan with pain as Pharma smashed it down on his mutilated hand.

"I think that's enough for that one," said Pharma. "He's still got some neural wiring functional in there, which is good. We don't want him to stop feeling it. If he gives you trouble, just play with it a little. He'll be singing for you in no time."

Tarn lifted his hand from the table, shackled it once again out to the side. Megatron groaned at the pressure of its own weight against the shattered, corroded struts within, lubricant prickling his optics.

"All right," said Pharma. "Let's start on the other one. From the wrist, this time."

He lifted the plating retractor once more.

"Frag frag frag," hissed Jazz.

Security had tightened. Mirage, next to him, gave up on his most recent attempt to hack the shipyard door with a groan.

"What are we going to do?" he asked. "The other way in will take six hours, easily. That's without stealing the shuttle."

Jazz got up out of his crouch. "What we're going to do is hope Megs can hold out another day, and the 'cons don't decide they need to take out the trash early."

He didn't remember Pharma leaving. Just at some point his other hand was returned to the cuffs to dangle painfully, uselessly, out to his sides. He couldn't move either. He had gone

somewhere beyond screaming, something blank and shuddering. Then Tarn grabbed one of his fingers and yanked. He jerked, whining.

“Medic hands,” said Starscream. “I’ll have to commend Pharma. You’re all talk and no substance, Megatron. You defy us, yet you’re so easily reduced to this.”

"I don't think it'll get Soundwave into his head any faster," Tarn observed. "He's still there. He's still *defiant*. Trust me, I can tell."

"Oh, I have a few more treats for our favorite traitor," said Starscream. He produced a syringe and several vials from his subspace.

“Drugs?” said Tarn, sounding revolted. “How typical.”

“If it works,” said Starscream, seemingly unconcerned. “Tilt his helm to the side so I can get at that line.”

Megatron put up what resistance he could, which was pathetic against the slow, firm push of Tarn’s hands. His helm was slowly tilted in the direction Starscream had demanded. Starscream moved in and he felt a needle prick the big line in his neck. He snarled helplessly.

What would he do under the influence of these 'drugs'? What *were* they? He had no control. No way of knowing. Would it overcome the anti-telepathy mod? Would it make him tell them about it?

The world started to get hazy. The seconds dragged out. Megatron tried to snarl and couldn't.

"You know, you should never have given this up," said Starscream, somewhere far away, and agony exploded in Megatron's chest. He screamed, panicking, thinking for one instant Tarn had pried him open again and given his spark to Starscream and then realized his chestplates were closed, it was a brand, it was a brand like the Decepticons wore, like they thought they could make him one of them.

"Never!" he snarled, or tried to. His words slurred, he had not control over his glossa, the world spun and tilted and his tank lurched and before he realized it he was purging, the last poor dregs of the energon they'd given him an eternity ago. Sound of disgust from Starscream, a blow, but his hands were nothing but agony and he was beyond that now, he was floating, a terrible sea of pain, of fear, of an erosion of the self—a smelting pool like the ones that had claimed so many of his sibling-miners.

Of course it was quiet in the medbay right now, because having some kind of distraction was for a universe that wasn't unrelentingly cruel.

Ratchet sat where he was and worried at his fingertips, trying not to think. Because thinking meant thinking about Megatron. Where he was.

What those fraggers might be doing to him.

Primus, how could he have been so stupid? He should have warned Megatron off looking for Terminus. He hadn't. He'd been *happy* for him. He'd encouraged him.

The door whooshed open to admit Rung, a cube in either hand.

"Oh no," Ratchet said. "Don't you dare. Did Prowl send you to make me feel better?" He all but sneered the last words.

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes," said Rung, and put the cube down in front of Ratchet. "But given that a great deal of Megatron's history with the Decepticons is history you share with him, it wouldn't be unreasonable for me to seek background information about that history before Special Operations brings him back." His mouth turned a little sadly. "I'm sure they'll call me in as part of his treatment."

Ratchet stared at him, then slowly sat down and took his cube. "You clever little slagger," he said.

Rung shrugged. "It *is* irregular. But if it'll help you to know that this will very likely help him, in turn, that's only good. I will, of course, keep it confidential. No other member of High Command will know exactly what you tell me, but gaining a more...nuanced understanding of the situation for myself will only be for the better."

"You clever little slagger," Ratchet repeated, sipping. He stared down into the iridescent depths and wondered where to start.

Tarn tilted Megatron's helm this way and that. The lost optic rather suited him, Tarn thought, as did the energon streaking down his back. The way there seemed to be no one behind that optic was disappointing, but he enjoyed handling Megatron like this all the same. It reminded him of the perfect trust Megatron had shown in him, long ago. The mech in the mines who had blazed with potential.

And had turned his back on it, despite all Tarn's efforts to nurture it.

"Look how he trusts me," he said aloud to Starscream, modulating his voice with Megatron's spark as he did. He could kill with it, but that wasn't what he had in mind. Not just yet, at least.

"He's drugged to the optics. The optic," said Starscream. "Of course he's gone all limply submissive on you. Come on, Tarn, we need the Matrix. Is a little professionalism too much to ask?"

Tarn made a face under the mask. Oh, Starscream thought he could do this better, did he? "He still might have information, even if he's immune to Soundwave. Let's not waste a golden opportunity."

"Fine," said Starscream with a huff, folding his arms. "You try whatever tricks you think will work when ripping his fragging hands apart didn't."

Oh, his tricks would work. Tarn's mouth twisted under the mask. Starscream thought he'd come out of this the power behind the Prime. Tarn was going to make sure he *wouldn't*.

"Megatron," he said, and modulated his voice just right. Starscream thought it was just the drugs, did he? "Megatron, you're safe here. You've done so well. Just tell me what you can, and I'll take care of it."

Megatron stiffened in his hands and overloaded, optics flaring.

"You've done so well," he said. "You kept quiet so well, Megatron. You didn't tell them

anything. Now I need you to brief me, before it's too late."

Megatron stared at him, optics wide. His claws dug in. "Now, Megatron!"

Megatron seemed to focus, his mouth twisting in anger. "Frag off," he grated.

"You little..." He put force into the words, and Megatron arched in the chains with a gasp and a whimper.

"I'll make that hurt just as much as the flogging, you ungrateful little fragger," Tarn whispered, under cover of Starscream's laughter. Every word twisted the knife deeper, and Megatron let out something like a breathy scream. Encouraged, Tarn pressed harder. "Don't think I don't know how to do it, how to make it *agony*."

Megatron did scream this time, and Tarn raked his claws down the mech's sides so that when Starscream looked, he had another reason. Starscream knew his voice could kill. He didn't need to know what else it could do.

"Well so much for that," said Starscream. "We're wasting time here. We want the Matrix before Optimus wakes up. He'll probably throw some kind of fit over it otherwise."

"Yes," said Tarn, rising. He looked at Megatron's hands, mangled. There was one joint yet unbroken. He reached for it, and jerked to dislocate it.

Megatron jolted in the restraints, but stayed silent. Starscream rolled his optics, flicked his wings, and turned his back on both of them, no doubt unable to face the ugly reality of what an interrogation demanded.

"I think that will do very well," Tarn said, still using the voice, and Megatron began to whimper, undamaged optic squeezed shut, frame shuddering in the restraints. Tarn couldn't resist. He leaned down, putting his mouth by Megatron's audial, crooning, to wring more of those delightful helpless noises from the younger mech's throat.

"I don't know what you're doing," said Starscream from the doorway, "but it's creepy as frag. Just dispose of him. I'll be back for the Matrix when you're done."

The door slid shut. Tarn looked down at Megatron's shuddering frame, his staring optic. The sick, blank expression on his face. He missed the liveliness, but Megatron had betrayed him, and there was only so much he could regret what happened to him subsequently.

He settled for running a hand over Megatron's chestplates. "Not much the Matrix can do for you now, is there?" he murmured. "Not now. Not at the end. Look at you, always full of fire and noise and determination. You lost yourself, trying to save the Autobots. You lost who you were. You died a long time ago, Megatron, you died when they shot you. Wasn't that when this weakness blossomed?"

"It's all right, Megatron. No more pain." He vented against an unexpected swell of emotion and knelt, facing Megatron. He caressed Megatron's face, took his chin in hand and kissed him. "I'll sing you home. You've done enough."

Megatron didn't react.

"What's so fragging funny?"

The two Decepticons looked up, startled. "We just found out how Tarn grabbed the Prime?" one offered after a time.

"How'd he grab the Prime, then?" Deadlock folded his arms. He couldn't forgive Megatron what he'd done, but...there had been something terribly familiar about how the Decepticons had been laughing. He hadn't liked it.

He didn't want to be around the lower regions of the base right now, either. The detention level wasn't *that* soundproofed.

They looked at each other, uncomfortable. "One of our buddies works in Intelligence, yeah?" one of them said. "They yanked the audio from the shuttle Tarn brought him back in. Apparently they'd sparkmerged."

"How the frag Tarn tricked Megatron into *that* is anyone's guess," said the other. "Can you *imagine*?"

"Anyway, Megs didn't seem real happy with it."

Deadlock felt cold. He'd thought himself inured to the casual cruelty of his fellow Decepticons, but this...

"And this is funny, is it?" he said.

"Well yeah. Can you imagine being dumb enough to be seduced by *Tarn*? Fragger's missing half his face. If you're that stupid, you deserve what you get." The Decepticon got a look at Deadlock's expression.

"Or um. You know. Not," he said, and started backing away.

Deadlock turned around and stalked back the way he'd come, spark and tank roiling. He shouldn't care. He shouldn't. He'd stopped enough of his fellow Decepticons from fragging with paybots he shouldn't even have been surprised. But even then, he'd assumed that their abuses were physical.

Not of the spark.

You didn't frag with somemech's spark, no matter how much you hated him. You just didn't. Even in the Dead End, even Overlord's bullies, you didn't fragging do that. You had to be really fragging sick to do that slag.

Long before he'd met Megatron or Optimus, someone had fragged with him like that, once. He didn't remember most of it; he guessed it was probably the dealer he'd bought from that day. The mech had been unnaturally eager to let him have a sample of the circuit speeders before buying. He had faint, horrible memories that still could bring him out of a light drowse with systems screaming panic. He had clearer ones of waking up with his chestplates open and his spark bruised and aching. He'd felt filthy afterwards. He'd hidden from his companions for a week afterward, sure they'd be able to tell. He couldn't bear anyone being able to tell.

Religion didn't really survive on the street. Superstition, on the other hand, sure as Pit did. Deadlock didn't need his own experiences to tell him fragging with someone's spark was fragging *wrong*. Sort of thing a god ought to curse you for, if there was anything like a god anymore.

Tarn had done—*that* to Megatron, and the Decepticon rumor mill thought it was *funny*.

They'd think it was funny if Turmoil made good on the obscene insults he loved throwing Deadlock's way. They'd think Deadlock's past was something to laugh at. Because whatever else you might say about Megatron, he was pretty good at tearing people apart with his bare hands, just like Drift, and if that didn't protect *Megatron*...

The dull horror of the streets was nipping at Deadlock's heels, and his instinctive response, to turn around and snarl, be too frightening, too strong, to be attacked, faltered. He hated Megatron for betraying him. For giving up on him and *leaving* him here. Couldn't he have *trusted* Deadlock? They'd fought Overlord's bullies together. They'd worked together. And suddenly Megatron had the Matrix and just left him for the high-class bots with their pretty paint because he was too good for streetmecha now.

Where Deadlock came from, you watched each other's backs. Even if your buddy was an idiot, you watched his fragging back because your friends were *everything*. You only threw away dead weight—dead weight that wasn't going to get better. That long ago mech who'd called himself Drift, he'd been dead weight after that thing with the dealer. He'd been on his own. No one wanted him. And Megatron had come along and saved him, like he mattered. Deadlock had thought he and Megatron could make it together.

He'd thought Megatron had considered him a friend.

That was obviously wrong.

He'd been pacing in circles, spiraling down through the base toward the detention level, keeping as much an optic out for himself as he always did, but the sudden clatter of a ventilation duct over his head took him by surprise. He mastered enough of himself that he grabbed at the weight that landed on him and threw it off, grabbing what felt like an arm and twisting it.

There was a yelp.

The Autobots' invisible spy—Mirage, wasn't it?—shimmered into sight under his hands. Deadlock wrenched the Autobot's arm up behind his back, eliciting a snarl. He was startled by that, didn't think the pampered mech had it in him.

Religion didn't survive on the streets Deadlock had lived on.

But superstition did.

And as the universe went, an Autobot spy tumbling out of a vent onto his helm wasn't exactly subtle. He eased the pressure on the mech's arm. "Turn it back on and come with me," he growled.

"And why would I do that?" Mirage demanded.

"You want your Prime back or not?"

Mirage stared at him, then shimmered and vanished. "Why are you doing this?" he asked, as Deadlock pulled him upright.

"Because what they've done to him," Deadlock yanked on the spy's captive wrist again, because while he needed to work with the Autobot, it didn't mean he had to be *nice* about it, "isn't right. And what they're *probably* doing to him is worse. Come on."

Tarn found himself hesitating, waiting for some kind of clarity to come back to Megatron's

optics, but there was only so long he could do that for before Starscream became suspicious, only so long he could indulge himself.

“You have to die,” he said, pleased with the matter-of-fact way he said it, how it seemed inarguable. “I was wrong to believe in you, and you’ve done your level best to destroy the Decepticon Cause and the Cybertron it could have created. You were useful for a time, Megatron, but not anymore. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Megatron’s optics still didn’t focus on him, but his mouth tightened. Tarn hoped he understood. Tarn had to believe he understood. Curse Starscream and his drugs—they might provide the useful excuse for a prisoner dying in his cell, but Tarn wanted Megatron to *know* why he was going to die, that Megatron *had* betrayed him.

He took Megatron’s chin gently in his hands, and began to sing, matching it with the sparkbeat he felt reflected through the other mech’s energon lines. Megatron might be a traitor to the cause he’d inspired, but Tarn had a certain mercy. Could *afford* a certain mercy. He felt his voice become true, hit every note perfectly, and smiled around the melody as he sang it, because this would be his best performance ever, and that was only right. Only the best for dear Megatron. He had created him, he would destroy him. And he would do it well.

Exhaustion and miscalculations by Starscream, not a suicide. The injuries from torture didn’t correspond in any way with those sustained during an escape. They were a way to turn this on Tarn’s only rival—he’d say he’d been under orders. Optimus didn’t like people who blamed their compatriots, so he’d defend Starscream as best he could, which would be more damning than any accusation in Optimus’s optics. Soundwave would back him—there was little love lost there. Starscream would fall in Lord Optimus’s view. Tarn could take his place, moving ever closer to his beloved leader’s audial. And all because of Megatron.

For all Megatron’s treachery, he had done Cybertron a very great service, and would again. When they won, Tarn was sure Optimus might be talked into erecting a statue—if not several—to his memory.

His voice dropped, gentling on the last moments of the song. A few more and the sparkbeat under his fingers would begin to falter and fade. It was already weaker now, though still steady. Megatron looked back at him with half-closed optics, almost in a stupor.

He was smiling, just a little. Tarn almost faltered before he mastered himself. What did Megatron know that he didn’t? How could he be *smiling* at a time like this?

Megatron gently leaned his helm forward. Tarn, frozen with surprise, the song coming from his lips still unbroken, let Megatron rest his helm against his own. Crimson optics lifted to meet his, and suddenly he saw a much younger mech. The miner he’d fallen in love with in the bowels of Messatine. The miner he’d seen such potential in.

“Don’t stop, Terminus,” Megatron murmured. “Please. Your voice is the only good thing about this place.”

He couldn’t do it.

Under his fingers, Megatron’s spark still beat steadily, and as he faltered, he broke the resonance and it came roaring back, fierce and strong. *It* knew what he had meant to do, he realized, even if Megatron looked at him with such trust, lost in some memory of the past.

The drugs. *Curse* Starscream!

Tarn released Megatron and staggered back, staring down at the other mech, who stared back at him almost plaintively. “Terminus?”

Tarn fled.

Chapter 94

Mirage followed Deadlock, pausing when he paused, keeping his steps quiet and his ventilations quieter. The other mech's grip was like iron around his wrist, brutal and hard in a way he'd not felt since he'd last been in grabbing range of his creators.

He was glad Deadlock hadn't asked him any questions, had only left his life hanging on the decision of whether to trust the mech. Hound was back there with Jazz, needed for his skill with his holoprojector. Mirage had a healthy respect for keeping his own plating in one piece, but he'd suffer anything to give Hound even a chance.

Jazz knew that, and Jazz had still taken both of them with him on this mission. That meant Jazz hadn't a better plan. He had to make this work.

If Deadlock got him to Megatron, he'd contact Jazz and not before. It would make this a risk worth taking.

Deadlock paused in a shadow. Mirage followed suit, staying very still. A moment later, Tarn went past, hurrying.

They stayed still a little longer. Then they were moving again, down a long dark corridor. Deadlock said nothing, but Mirage knew a detention area when he saw one. When he *smelled* one. Ozone and burnt metal and boiled energon, it seemed. The ozone worried Mirage. You smelled that around spark injuries.

Deadlock stopped in front of a cell. "Interrogation," he said. "Here. Passcode." A short transmission ping. Mirage accepted it, running antiviral programs on it as he tried to peer through the containment field. There, Megatron's helm, the rise and fall of his shoulders as his ventilation systems gasped for air. At least he was alive.

"If I use this, they'll know you helped me," he said.

"Frag no they won't." Deadlock bared his teeth. "It's Turmoil's."

He didn't dare open the cell until the others were in position, just in case someone was monitoring it. "Thank you," he said aloud. "You should be elsewhere. We'll take care of it."

Deadlock hesitated, looked in at Megatron, then away. "I'm not an Autobot," he told Mirage. "I'm only sick of how Megatron makes everyone stupid around here."

Mirage tilted him an invisible smile. "He brings out the best in his friends, and the worst in his foes," he said. "Why not become one of his friends?"

"Frag off," snarled Deadlock, and stalked away.

Mirage waited until he was gone before he commed Jazz. "I have Megatron's location and an access code for the cell. He's online. I'm taking their attention off you."

"Acknowledged. Rodimus has the shuttle. Make it a good one, Mir."

Mirage smiled to himself, carefully not looking into the cell, then flung himself up at the ceiling with a leap, catching the edge of a duct cover and pulling it open. His next jump took him into the ventilation shaft. He tugged the panel closed after him. If only his creator knew what he was actually doing with all his acrobatics training. He'd have a fit.

Thanks to Megatron, that thought was amusing rather than terrifying. Like everyone on this mission, he owed Megatron a lot. If he could be brought out alive, they would do it.

There was an edge where pain stopped being pain, when it became something in-between, a deep exhaustion and misery over which stabs of agony flitted, temporary and changing. Megatron had felt the drugs begin to fuzz away from his mind, though he was far from awake. He hurt. He was grieving. He wasn't sure why he was grieving. His hands weren't responding. His mouth hurt. There was hazy memory of suffocating heat, a profound sense of violation. Was it from Soundwave?

A hand touched him on the side of the helm. He gasped, trying to flinch away, but he hurt too much.

"Oh, Primus, mech, you're a mess." Megatron managed to online his one functional optic. Someone peered down at him through a narrow band of red; it was a moment before he could bring the face into focus enough to recognize Jazz.

Jazz. Jazz was here for him? After everything. Jazz hadn't left him. He tried something like a smile, but clamminess swept over him and his tank roiled. He purged, without paying much attention to what he purged *on*. His mouth hurt worse. Stung. A faint memory rose. Hands in his mouth. His dentae...

"Don't worry. I've seen worse," said Jazz, with a grim humor. "And been purged on worse. Bet they drugged you to the optics, huh? Okay, so here's where it starts to suck for you. I'm going to need you to be silent, and I'm not going to be able to be particularly careful about your injuries, so let's just see your medical port there... by the way, don't tell Ratchet I can do this, he'd blow a gasket. Sorry I can't do much for the pain. Learned some things but not that one."

Megatron grit his dentae and put up with the feeling of Jazz's jack easing into his medical port. His vocalizer offlined with a pop.

"There we are. Now the cuffs." Megatron all but collapsed when he was released, but Jazz caught him, surprisingly strong for his size. He groaned, leaning into the smaller mech's arms.

"All right. Gonna need you to walk, my mech. I know you don't want to but I can't fraggin' carry you."

Jazz needed him to walk. Jazz had come for him. He'd do whatever was needed. Help Jazz. Keep him safe. Megatron tried a few halting steps, sagging heavily against Jazz, who threw out an arm to support him, coming down across his ravaged back. His grunt of pain came out silent.

"Sorry, sorry," said Jazz, and for an instant Megatron thought he heard dismay in the light, gentle voice. "Just gotta get to the escape pod. You're gonna be okay, mech. Just got chewed up a little, is all. Ratch will fix you right up."

Hazily, Megatron thought the day Ratchet could fix a broken spark would be the day the mech could start his own religion, the clearest thought he'd had in what seemed like hours. After a few steps, something pressed up under his other arm, putting equally painful pressure on his back, but picking up some of his weight. Megatron turned his head. Hound. Mirage's conjunx.

"Took ya long enough," whispered Jazz, to a soft huff from Hound. "Get that hologram up."

It seemed like a stumbling eternity. They crossed the main hall, he could tell that much, and

wondered what he'd been disguised as. He was pretty sure that was energon running from him, dripping. But no one noticed.

The hangar was new. It was also empty. He made a querying noise.

"Mirage gave them some stuff to focus on," Jazz said. "Up you go. Up, there's a good mech. Everyone here? Let's go."

They laid him out on one of the benches of the craft, closed it up. He felt his good optic drifting offline again, and he gladly surrendered to the stupor once more. Jazz bustling around him was a comfort. It made him feel safe. Jazz had come for him after all.

Mirage flew, because while Rodimus was incredible at hotwiring shuttlecraft, Jazz wasn't going to let the reckless little idiot within a mile of flying anything. Jazz focused on keeping Megatron alive.

His spark was still going, but the beat stumbled a little as it went, an irregularity he didn't like. It was fast and quiet, too, almost frantic, but there was frag-all he could do for it without splitting open Megatron's chestplates. That could do more harm than good. So he set up an energon drip and slipped a painchip in, and set about making sure the whip-weals on Megatron's back quit leaking, at least a little.

He tried to do something for the Decepticon brand on the mech's chestplates, but as soon as he touched it Megatron sobbed and tried to fight him, striking at him with a hand. Jazz reared back, but the edge of Megatron's hand caught him a glancing blow. It barely had enough force to hurt, but Megatron made a horrible noise and immediately dragged both hands in tight against his chest, whimpering as he did. Cradling them, or trying to, because it didn't look like they were *responding*.

"Oh frag," whispered Jazz. He'd not gotten a good look at Megatron's hands. He didn't want to now. "Oh frag," he said again, and slipped another pain chip in. "We'll get you to Ratchet," he said, unconvincing to his own audials. "We'll get you to Ratchet. He'll fix you up, mech. He'll fix you up."

Megatron subsided again, sagging against the bench of the shuttlecraft. He passed out somewhere over Tesarus. Jazz went back to just keeping him alive, not wanting to think further than that.

"Oh Primus," said Ratchet, when he saw Megatron on the gurney, but limited himself to that. His hands were in motion, he didn't have to think too hard about it. Too many battlefields. Thank Primus First Aid didn't need instruction. He could concentrate on his work, on basic repairs as the systems scan ran.

"Frag!" he snarled when he saw the results, completely involuntary. "Aid, we're opening him up, someone's fried half his circuits, and he's had at least two near spark arrests in the last ten hours."

"Primus," said Aid, little and shocked. "You can see why—"

"Yeah, I can." They undid his chest armor quickly, relieved it responded, but the inner petals of the chamber itself were fused tight. Ratchet swore again, and went to work on opening the chamber. They were going to have to replace so much. He sent a ping to Wheeljack to have replacements of the moving parts milled, soon as possible, because they were going to have to be

replaced when he was finished. But they had to get to the spark itself, had to stabilize it. One spark arrest was bad enough. *Two* in ten hours, and Megatron was still kicking, however feebly. Ratchet'd be impressed if he didn't feel like purging instead.

The inside of the chamber had been melted smooth from the heat. He'd want to replace the whole thing. Aid, usually more sensible, made another tiny noise of horror.

"Some fragger cranked up his outputs," said Ratchet, trying to bury himself in teaching. "With the armor closed. Something like twelve overloads, one after the next, I'd guess, direct spark overloads, to start to cause this kind of damage. Probably more. First spark arrest came from that. Second—see the scarring here and here? Second was someone almost gutting him. Some remote device, I'd guess. See how it overlays the scars from the overloads, and the ripple pattern?"

Lecturing was something to keep him focused, his hands steady, no matter the horror of what he was saying.

He removed enough of the armor they could stabilize the spark, clamped the spark support to the holes in the chamber, closed up what he could and turned elsewhere. "Back looks awful," he said. "Good on Jazz for getting the field patch on that. Not much more we can do there. It looks terrible, but it's in better shape than pretty much any other part of him. We'll ignore that. What else—start replacing the circuits closest to his spark, will you?" He noticed the drying energon around Megatron's mouth, and carefully slipped a finger in to check the mech's dentae. Someone had filed his incisors flat and taken the edge off of all the plates. "Hope that was because you bit them, kid," he murmured. "Got a little of your own back."

"Ratchet," said First Aid, softly. "Ratchet, his hands."

Ratchet looked, and for the first time in centuries, *really* felt the start of a purge. He used his medical protocols to override it. He'd be in for Pit later from his fuel systems for that.

"Yeah," he said, steadily enough, amazed he managed it. "Get to work on the circuits. I'll disconnect those so his frame doesn't try to fix them itself and make things worse."

Aid nodded, jerkily, and Ratchet went to work, hissing through his dentae as he realized the acid burns weren't just superficial. The hands were all but charred husks. He wasn't sure if he could fix them. Better Megatron wake to the trauma of no hands at all than the pain of these, and he simply couldn't repair them attached.

He pulled plating back, carefully decoupling wires. After a while, he gave up on removing them at the wrists and moved midway up Megatron's forearms, pulling plating back. He started with the cables that manipulated hand movement, tacking each down as he went so the enormous tensions they were under didn't cause them to retract all the way up into the shoulders when they were released. Some had already snapped. He'd have to go hunting for them later. Then the pistons and struts. Whatever had hollowed out his hands had dripped into his arms, leaving huge burned lesions crawling with Megatron's own nanites and their fluids, mixing with the horrible fluids the insulted metals were weeping. He tried to locate where the burns became mild enough the struts could be saved, got his boltcutters, and clipped them there, cleaning as he went.

He closed up, moved the hands into nanite gel to try to keep the salvageable metals alive. His fingers caught on the burrs of drill holes, the smooth, still faintly soft surfaces of the weld burns. The struts inside Megatron's fingers, whatever wasn't eaten through by chemical burns, were a mix of blunt-force trauma and torsion. The delicate cables within the wrist and fingers were utterly destroyed, as was most of the neural wiring.

Even as he put them into the gel, he knew they weren't salvageable. But everyone knew you couldn't build a medic's hands properly, and you especially couldn't during a parts shortage. Megatron's miners' hands had worked shockingly well, for what they were, and Ratchet suspected the Matrix had meddled there as well, when it had been adding the claws. Ratchet hesitated, looking at the ruined hands, seeing Pharma's work in every lesion and broken strut.

Megatron might have sacrificed being a medic because of the Matrix, but Pharma had made sure of it. The possibility of getting him hands with the necessary dexterity was nonexistent. Frag, he was probably going to wind up with *claws*.

But his hands were the secondary issue. Ratchet turned back to helping Aid make the repairs Megatron would need to stay alive long enough to wake up.

When it was all done, Ratchet sat heavily next to Megatron, where he floated in blissful stasis within a CR tank, lines running to and through him to keep him online, and put his head in his hands.

He kept seeing Megatron as he had when they'd first met, the terrified youngster in the back of the class, clinging to a datapad by main force. Stumbling through anatomy, through pathology recitations, looking proud as he came back with his first full-credit score on an exam. Still working through the horror of what Trepan had done to him, but for all that, still strangely innocent. Inclined to believe the best of everyone.

Primus, and Terminus was riddled all through that, wasn't he. Once they'd realized he'd seen them for what they were, they'd been all but welded together, blissfully happy as only young mecha in love for the first time might be.

He tried to see what might have gone wrong there.

He couldn't.

Terminus had never betrayed so much as a flicker.

Ratchet stroked the side of the tank. "Primus, kid. I'm so sorry."

He missed the days in the clinic. Remembered Megatron passing his final exams, the conferral of his apprenticeship. He'd been much more proud of Megatron for that than for getting the Matrix. The Matrix hadn't given him half as much Pit as the medical department had. Megatron skillfully resetting his nasal ridge, joking gently with him to keep him from falling apart. Megatron trying to catch things while delirious.

Ratchet found a sob building up in his vocalizer. The kid had been through Pit and out the other side, again and again and again and again, and how fragging *dare* someone put him through it yet *again*? How many times could someone's spark go through a shredder before it stopped healing? Megatron had fragging well deserved better. Terminus had owed him that at least for his fragging *trust*. He should have been able to have someone to trust like that, and what did he get? Raped and cut half to scrap, optic punched out, dentae filed flat, almost murdered—couldn't the kid be allowed a little kindness in his fragging function?

"Some fine god you are," Ratchet snarled at the ground, and stamped it for good measure. "You're doing a scrap job of protecting him, slagbrain. If I weren't putting him back together, I'd go down there and start dismantling you, you useless, self-aggrandizing, half-sparked excuse for a deity. I'll make Unicron seem like a fit of bad oil! Glory of the Prime and all, yeah, you're big on

that, aren't you—but *who had to cut his fragging hands off, lubricant sucker?*”

He realized he'd been yelling. At least the room was soundproofed and Megatron in no condition to notice. He was standing now—he lowered himself back into the chair and kept glaring.

“You probably frag scraplets,” he muttered, and leaned back. “You owe him better, aftface.”

He put a hand on Megatron's CR tank. “You owe him better,” he repeated.

Chapter 95

Was Megatron going to hate him for this?

Prowl wasn't sure, and the way his spark quailed at the idea was nothing against the iron feeling that, regardless of Megatron's opinions on the matter, this was the only way to make something of the horrors that had been inflicted on the mech. The only way to get some kind of revenge for what had been done to him. The rest of High Command was agreed. This was the best way to turn the situation to Autobot advantage.

In any case, standing in front of the podium at a press conference was not a time for misgivings. He'd delivered the requisite pleasantries; now time to give the newsbots what they were waiting for. He tried not to frown at the sea of cameras and microphones in front of him—however innocuous, he did not like anyone having recordings of his statements.

Deep vent. Meet a few optics to give the impression of sincerity, uncomfortable though it was. Thank Primus Jazz had let him know no one could tell the difference between meeting someone's optics and staring at their nasal ridge.

"We are pleased to confirm that our agents were able to retrieve Megatron Prime, and returned with him early this morning. The Prime is presently in critical but stable condition. Chief Medical Officer Ratchet expects a full recovery."

Deep vent, hope that the language was vague enough to outrage Autobot and Neutral sentiment, but not embarrass Megatron too hideously—the ordeal had been terrible enough.

"Reconstruction of the events surrounding the Prime's kidnapping indicate one Decepticon asset in particular: formerly Terminus of Kaon, he now identifies himself solely as Tarn. Tarn was able to impersonate an individual close to the Prime, render him unconscious, and abduct him to Decepticon territory.

"Autobot High Command and neutral monitoring organizations have raised concerns before about the systematic abuse of prisoners of war in Decepticon hands. I am sorry to report that Megatron Prime was no exception to this pattern." Prowl paused to let that sink in, then continued, "While he remains unconscious, *none* of the Prime's injuries are consistent with those that might be expected to be sustained during capture or a thwarted escape attempt. As such, Autobot High Command and the Iaconian League of States are issuing warrants for the arrests of Starscream of Vos, the then-acting-commanding officer of the Decepticon military forces, Pharma of Vos, Chief Medical Officer of the Decepticon military, and Tarn for their role in flagrant prisoner of war abuse, namely torture, deprivation of medical care, attempted murder, and sundry outrages on the person of the Prime." The last was a catch-all charge, which some Primes past had used to imprison mecha who so much as bumped into them on the street, but Prowl and the others had decided on its inclusion because of the implication of there being worse abuses committed than simple torture.

Prowl wanted that implication. Prowl wanted people wondering what horrors the Decepticons had committed that were too obscene to state baldly. Prowl wanted them *scared*. Disgusted. Because he'd *seen* the actual report, he'd signed off on the requisition for sparkchamber-grade metals, he'd signed essentially a blank check for Wheeljack and Perceptor so they could get whatever was needed, at whatever cost, to rebuild Megatron's sparkchamber.

His fragging *sparkchamber*.

The horrors the imagination could supply far outstripped a statement of fact, even the fact the Decepticons had melted his sparkchamber shut from the inside, or how they'd done it, even if he could have stomached putting that information out there without Megatron's permission.

It worked. There was a murmur through the audience, mecha looking at each other uncertainly. Prowl continued. "If the Decepticons value justice, as they claim to, they should be more than willing to turn these individuals over to face a fair, Neutral court. We continue to be interested in a diplomatic solution to this war, but should the Decepticons continue to display a flagrant disinterest in the rule of law, in decent treatment for their prisoners, we have but one conclusion to draw:

"That the Decepticon Empire wants one thing, and one thing only: complete dominion over Cybertron itself, with their chosen few given complete impunity in action. That the Decepticons desire only the ability to rule over the rest of us. That they view us, those who disagree with them however mildly, the same way the deposed Functionists viewed those they named Disposables: bodies to be used as they wish, for whatever nefarious purposes they wish. *Should this be the case*, the Autobots are *proud* to stand against this tide of depraved vengeance. Freedom is the right of all sentient beings—freedom from want, from oppression, from fear and torment. We will not stand idly by while abuses like this are committed and condoned."

Another pause.

"Thank you. I will now take your questions."

The familiar, comforting smells of a medbay were what first permeated the comforting, painless fog wrapped around him, then Ratchet's voice, falling and rising as he read something aloud. Megatron focused on listening, realized it was a medical textbook. His mouth quirked at the thought.

Ratchet moved, and his hand settled on Megatron's arm. While Megatron's optics were still initiating, he could imagine the mech's expression well, could all but see him leaning over him, worried and watching his face intently.

He reached to pat Ratchet's hand, reassure him, and didn't make contact. Felt himself frown.

That wasn't right. He worked on bringing his optics online. Only one responded, showing a pixelated gray mass over him that was probably Ratchet. A few blinks; the resolution improved, and color followed it.

"Hey there kid." Ratchet peering fondly down at him. "Good to have you back. Jazz and Prowl have fretted themselves sick. I've put a cap on the number of treats they can smuggle you." The smile faded a little. "How do you feel?"

"Not good," said Megatron, too tired to be anything but honest. The pain was tugging at him, a deep ache everywhere—probably the last of the sedatives leaving and the pain chips not quite filling the gap. His hands felt wrong.

He raised his arms to look, and there was a terrible hopeful moment when he wondered if he'd seen correctly, if his optic wasn't working, but he tried to flex his fingers and all he felt was a tugging high up against the struts of his arm.

They were gone. They were really gone. Pharma had—Pharma had taken them, and he'd been

right, and Ratchet couldn't... He looked helplessly at Ratchet and to his shame, his voice cracked. "Ratchet?"

"They're gonna work just fine," said Ratchet, a little strained, patting his shoulder. "I'm not done fixing them yet. They fragged you up pretty good."

Ratchet thought Megatron didn't know what he looked like when he was lying. Megatron closed his optics briefly, because it was better than the expression of strained hope on Ratchet's face.

"There's a parts shortage," Ratchet said. "We both know that. There's a parts shortage; we'll be able to do a lot when we get that resolved. It's—it's not the end of it, Megatron." A forced smile.

Megatron made himself smile in return. It was hard, but he *had* to, he wouldn't be himself if he couldn't. But after a few moments, it was too much. He looked away. "I knew I was going to lose them," he admitted quietly. He glanced at Ratchet. *You do not have to lie to me.*

"Primus, kid." Ratchet's hand smoothed over his forearm. "Primus, am I glad to have you back. I'm sorry."

Of course he couldn't actually say it. Megatron wondered, briefly, if his dream of being a medic mattered more to him or to Ratchet. He at least had been able to lay it aside. He'd been the one to make the decision. There was a sort of power in that, he supposed. Better than being the one watching.

Now, it was made for him, and he hadn't realized how dearly he'd hoped to revisit it, to have the luxury of *unmaking* it. That somewhere in his spark, he'd nurtured a hope that he could, at the end of the war, lay aside the mantle of Prime and resume his studies. Become the medic he and Ratchet had hoped he could become.

"Don't blame yourself," he said aloud. "I know what they did to me. Pharma was—he was very clear." He wished the drugs had erased more of that time. He could still smell the vial Pharma had waved at him.

"I should have killed him," said Ratchet, his voice small and bitter. "I should have, in that ruin. A mech who'd murder patients—I knew he hated you, Megatron, and I could have stopped this if I'd stopped him *then!*"

"And it would have taken something vital of you away," Megatron said. "Don't regret that, Ratchet, I don't want you making that sacrifice for me." Because there'd always be the question, when he looked at Ratchet, if he regretted it. If he'd look back, and only see a mech he'd betrayed himself for, and feel resentment.

With his connection to Terminus unmoored, the pain of seeing Ratchet look at him the same way Tarn had seemed unbearable and all too possible.

Ratchet's hand went hard on his arm. "Don't even think it," he said fiercely. "I'm not going to abandon you."

"They're not salvageable, are they," Megatron stated, meeting Ratchet's optics. "Ratchet. You trained me. I know what Pharma did to me. You're not a failure if you can't repair them—he didn't leave you anything *to* repair."

Ratchet's shoulders hunched. "He didn't."

Megatron looked down at the stumps. He couldn't grieve them in front of Ratchet; it would hurt him too much. "What are my options?"

"We'll," Ratchet started, had to swallow hard before continuing, "we'll discuss that later. I've got a few things coming in tonight that will help."

Megatron ducked his head in acknowledgement. "I trust you," he said aloud. "I...I've been a fool, Ratchet."

"The stupidest thing you did was trust Terminus," said Ratchet. "Who, if my impression was correct, you'd intended to sparkbond before the Functionists whisked him away. Twice."

His voice softened, his hand still stroking Megatron's forearm. "I thought it was gonna work out too, kid," he said. "Woulda arranged the celebrations if you'd asked. But it's pretty damned clear both of us were wrong. No one who loved you would have done this. No matter the provocation, no matter the fact you're the stubbornest mech I've ever met. People who love you don't do things like this."

The laugh that coaxed from him was tiny and crackling with static, but it was genuine. "Are you quoting me to myself?"

"Figures that was someone you'd listen to."

Megatron managed another tiny snort. He sobered quickly. "Ratchet," he said. "His spark. It was—*wrong*. Sick. I can't describe it, but it was...wrong. And I don't know for sure, I don't know how to tell, but I think—that is, it didn't seem new. Like it wasn't what Trepan had done. At least, not all what Trepan had done to him."

"Primus, kid," said Ratchet again, sadly. "I'm sorry. If there was any way we could have stopped this, found you sooner, warned you..."

"Don't you blame yourself too," said Megatron.

Ratchet fixed him with a hard stare. "As for the other thing you're probably worrying about: Jazz and Prowl aren't angry with you. You have nothing on your conscience, do you understand me?"

Megatron blinked at him, startled he knew to speak to the heart of *that* anxiety.

"Yeah, I have no tact. I'll be sending them in. They're desperate to see you." Ratchet met his optic. "I know it's hard to believe right now, but they—and the rest of the Autobots—care about you. No matter how the Decepticons tricked you. No matter what they did to you. We love you, Megatron. This doesn't change that."

He reached to Megatron's face, and instead of flinching away, Megatron found himself freezing. Ratchet hesitated.

"Just a metalmesh wipe," he said quietly. "For the optical cleanser."

"Optical cleanser?" said Megatron, and bent to rub the edge of his arm against his face. It came away damp; he hadn't even been aware of crying.

Ratchet nodded, waited until Megatron leaned in and offered his face before wiping it. "We love you," he said softly again. "Prime or not, medic or not—you're an Autobot, and you're *ours*. And nothing is going to change that." His vents hiccupped, and Megatron wished desperately for

hands in that moment, so he could return the favor, wipe the cleanser from Ratchet's face. "No matter what they told you," he finished, fierce. "Megatron, I don't say it enough, but I am so proud of you."

Ratchet knew Pharma. Ratchet knew how Pharma hurt people, and he was speaking to it.

"Thank you," he said. "It means a very great deal from the mech I admire most." Primus, so stilted, where were his words? But Ratchet didn't seem to care. Ratchet smiled down at him through his tears, grieved but yes, proud, and something of the way Megatron's spark ached seemed to lift, a small measure of comfort curling in close.

Chapter 96

It was good that Jazz arrived later, when Megatron was feeling less tender. There was only so much open honesty he could tolerate in a day, and Ratchet had used it up. Ratchet had given him one of the datapads rigged to receive verbal commands, as many of the empurata survivors used while recovering from their reconstructive surgeries, so he was reasonably well entertained. He did wish Ratchet had given him something other than an infectious diseases textbook; vote of confidence that he might be able to return to medicine it might be, but he was going to be imagining catching these diseases for the next year.

"Hey," said Jazz, tentative where he stood in the doorway.

Megatron mock growled at him. "Is that how you really address your superior officer?"

The relieved grin on Jazz's face stretched as wide as the mech's visor. "Only when he's my friend."

"Insubordination," said Megatron, and lifted an arm. "Come here."

That grin got wider and Jazz hurried to obey, hugging Megatron awkward and one armed across the berth. "Got to admit I'm surprised," he said. "You aren't really one for touch."

Megatron had surprised himself as well, but right now he wanted physical closeness that wasn't a lie, meant safety. He didn't say that. Instead, he snorted derisively. "If I can't surprise you, what's the point?"

Jazz pulled away. "Seriously, mech. You're gonna have a lot to deal with, and it's going to suck slag. What variety of slag it's gonna suck, and just how much it's gonna suck neither of us know yet, but Ratch is gonna have me keeping an eye on you, all right? Just remember I'm the one who puts everyone else back together after they've had a stay at *chez* Decepticon, and I really ain't about to judge."

"Yes," said Megatron dryly, "so Ratchet keeps reminding me. Sit down and tell me what's happened in my absence; talking about how deeply traumatized I'm going to be bores me."

Jazz snorted and sat. "Not much, other than Prowler and me climbing the walls with anxiety about you. He actually got in a fight with Ironhide, you know."

Megatron made a face. "I run a day care, not an army. Apparently."

"Definitely," said Jazz. "Alrighty. So. You probably want a situation update: our intel tells us Optimus came out from under sedation a few hours after you did. Seems like he needed at least a partial rebuild. No news on any temper tantrums aimed at our culprits, so they may not have told him all the details of your stay, and he probably didn't ask further."

"He doesn't tend to. Starscream wouldn't volunteer the information if he could help it." Megatron huffed a small sigh. "Jazz... I owe you an apology."

"Absolutely not," said Jazz. "Look, I get it. If it had been Prowl in that building, and I hadn't seen him for years? I woulda been a lot stupider than you, mech."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"You shouldn't," said Jazz. "I wouldn't have wanted me listening in either. You got abducted. That's not on you."

"I was a fool," said Megatron, quiet. "I walked in, and I saw Tarn and I assumed he hadn't meant all the things he'd done, it was a cover, and Terminus would come back to me. I was wrong. And I was a fool to think it in the first place. What he'd done to you should have been warning enough."

He turned his face away, suddenly ragingly angry with himself. "And when I went to him anyway, despite what he'd done, I ignored the intelligence report, I ignored my responsibility to the Autobots, and I ignored what I owed you. No one who'd done something like that to *any* of my Autobots should have been a mech that I would..."

He couldn't say it. It was too humiliating. He fell silent. It was hard to look back at Jazz, and he didn't want to. But he had no right to avoid it, so he did.

"You done there, mech?" said Jazz. "Think you missed any bits there, while you were self-flagellating?"

He huffed out a breath that really wasn't a laugh at Megatron's shocked expression. "Have you ever wondered why Ratchet wouldn't talk about what Pharma did to him? Why he wouldn't ask for help?"

Megatron had, but he didn't know why Jazz was bringing this up now.

Jazz leaned over and prodded him in the chestplates. "Because of exactly what you're feeling now. That. The shame. The anger at yourself. The feeling that you needed your friends to haul your aft out of it. The *I should have known better*, the *I shouldn't have fallen for it*, the *I got myself into this mess*? Yeah, all that. That's pretty much normal. You're not alone. And you don't need to do this alone.

"We don't blame you. None of us blame you, any more than any of us blame Ratchet. We're all Autobots here, and we're all going to get through the slag this war throws at us together, no matter what."

Megatron found that difficult to believe or accept. It sounded like the sort of thing they'd said in the mines to someone who'd fragged up and almost gotten everyone killed, but it wasn't worth fighting over.

And he had fragged up, and he had almost gotten everyone killed.

Then he looked down at Jazz's face, and horrified himself by how much he wanted to believe the earnest concern on the mech's face. He shouldn't, he had no reason to expect anything but irritation from the mech, and Jazz, at the bottom of it, lied professionally. To anyone necessary. Including him, if necessary.

"You saved me when I'd fragged up," Jazz reminded him softly. "It's no more than what you've done for any of us. You deserve this too, Megatron. We're not angry with you. And the more times I have to repeat that, the more times a week I'm scheduling you to go talk to Rung. Which you're going to do, because it's standard procedure for any returning POW, and you signed the damn order yourself."

He still didn't believe Jazz, but it was too much work to argue.

"Yeah," said Jazz, sounding a little sad, "we'll work on that. How about we talk a little

more about our political and strategic considerations?"

"Yes," said Megatron, as firmly as he could. "That would be acceptable."

"Ratchet's probably hinted about this, but the parts shortage means that it'll be a while before we can get you proper hands again," said Jazz. "Very likely, you'll need to make do with modified claws from one of our empurata survivors who's already had theirs replaced. We'll work on making sure that's temporary. We do have replacement optics in store, and again, I'm pretty sure Ratchet's just holding off to make sure the new one's got the same low-light settings as your existing optic."

"And how do you know this much about my medical treatment?" asked Megatron.

"Second- and third-in-command have access to data on medical supplies, and I pulled you out of there," Jazz pointed out. "Here's the other thing; once we get your temporary hands on you, we'd like to do a press conference. It'll show you're still online and kicking, and it'll also show the neutrals how close Decepticon depravity is to Functionist. Especially among empurata survivors. Historically, they've been more interested in the Decepticons because of our association with the Iaconian nobility."

Jazz didn't need to elaborate on that further. One eye, claws instead of hands—Megatron was all too aware how he'd look to that audience. And as sick as it made him feel, Jazz was right. As little as he wanted to appear weak, the demonstration that the Decepticons would happily take the eyes and hands of their prisoners would strike a deep, terrible chord for others like him.

"I'll do it," he said aloud.

"It'll be worthwhile," said Jazz, but he still looked sad.

Ratchet brought the hands as soon as Jazz left. From his expression, it was clear he'd hoped for better.

"They were the only thing anywhere near acceptable," he told Megatron. "All the others only had two claws. I don't think that would help you with anything. I did what I could, but with the parts shortage..."

"I understand," said Megatron, looking at them. They were three-clawed, at least, and that was better than the alternative, but learning how to use them would be difficult. There was no way he'd be doing surgery with them.

"I'll build some. As soon as I can," said Ratchet. "They won't be like what you had, but..."

"I understand." Megatron made himself look up, still trying to accept the claws as what would be on his wrists, what he'd have to live with. "Really, Ratchet. I do. I've seen the requisitions. I know what you're working with. I don't expect more."

"You think that makes me feel better?" demanded Ratchet. "Primus, Megatron, this is bad enough. What happens later in this damned war? When we have hardly anything and something happens to you and I *can't* do anything for you, and..." He trailed off. "I don't want to be afraid for you," he said quietly. "I want to stop needing to be afraid for you, Megatron."

Megatron was silent. That was something he couldn't give Ratchet, no matter how he tried. There were too many other people who needed him.

As if he'd realized it was unfair, Ratchet had fallen silent. He glanced at Megatron then left, returning with another tray of instruments and First Aid in tow.

"I think you'll want to be unconscious for this," said First Aid gently, and Megatron nodded, offering an arm and his medical port. He didn't know if he could bear watching the surgery, not after what Pharma had done.

And stasis right now seemed easier than being awake. Easier than facing sympathy or Ratchet's grief or his own feelings.

Jazz watched the way the datapad slipped in the uncertain grip of Megatron's new "hands", three pronged claws that barely merited the word. He was trying not to crush it, Jazz realized, and another pang of guilt sparked through him.

"This isn't right," he said to Prowl.

"It's right," said Prowl. "But it isn't kind. Megatron understands, and he agreed to it. He's always known that being Prime means he can't react in the ways any reasonable mech would want to."

"This is still cruel," said Jazz. "We saw what Soundwave did to him. We saw what it cost him to get up and tell everyone about it. Now we're making him do it about something much, much worse."

"This is how we keep him, and the rest of us, alive," said Prowl. "Have you spent any time thinking about what a Decepticon victory would look like, Jazz? What they did to him is mild compared to what they will do, if they have the time and luxury to do so. Let alone what they'll do to the rest of us. We need every advantage we can get, including public opinion. And giving everyone the clear image of what the Decepticons will do to anyone, regardless of status, who falls into their hands is a blow we can't afford not to deal."

Prowl lowered his voice. "He's saving us, Jazz, and he knows it, and that's why he agreed. It's who he is."

"Yeah, but don't assume that can bear the weight of the entire planet," said Jazz. "So what that it hasn't happened yet. Every mech has a breaking point. We don't have the right to push him to his. We're his allies. He trusts us, Prowl."

"He trusts us because we won't put his needs over those of the Autobots," said Prowl. "I trust him because he won't put *our* needs, *anyone's* needs over those of the Autobots."

Jazz looked at him in agony, knowing he was right. But also knowing that he had, all his function, when doing the equations of necessity, excluded Prowl from them. Ever since they'd left the streets. Ever since he'd had the luxury.

And the idea of losing that luxury just as he found another person he wanted to protect was one of the most sparkbreaking things he'd ever had to confront.

He watched Megatron begin the conference. If it weren't for his injuries, you couldn't tell from his voice, his demeanor, that he'd been rescued from Pit. The sort of witness they would have loved to put on the stand, back in their Enforcer days.

Prowl had his priorities. Maybe, probably, he was right. But Megatron needed someone who had his back, no matter what, and Jazz vowed inwardly that in the war to come, that would be

him.

His time in the medbay was hazy and unreal, and that was what had made it tolerable. Ratchet and Jazz and First Aid had all made an effort to make sure he wasn't alone, that he wouldn't wake up in total darkness even in the middle of the night, and that there were always treats waiting on the berthside table, the physical component of Ratchet's repeated imprecations to fuel decently. It was pleasant, he supposed, if he could feel anything most of the time.

Shocked. That covered it. He was shocked, in shock, and most things just didn't register. He was probably supposed to be relieved by the sheer number of pillows people had scrounged for him, tucking them in around his frame like a nest, by the datapads, by the number of people who wanted to spend time with him and make sure he was all right, by the stupid games Bumblebee and Cliffjumper kept uploading to the datapads with reports on them, "to make sure you don't get bored". But he didn't feel it. He didn't feel much of anything, except for a visceral twist of disgust when he looked at his temporary hands, frustration when he dropped a stylus or datapad for the thousandth time that day.

He was pretty sure Jazz knew. He was also pretty sure that was why Jazz sent him Rung so early, so he could get used to the mech being around, to talking to him, before his feelings had returned.

"Aren't you supposed to be taking notes?" he asked the first time the other mech showed up, carefully closing the door behind him. Rung smiled a little.

"I find that, with most patients, falling into the expected stereotypes can make them more uncomfortable than not," he said. "I do, however," he dug in a compartment under one of his hips, "have some of the rehabilitation exercises that Ratchet's been swearing he won't give you until tomorrow, and a box of rust sticks. They're the spicy ones. Jazz left the strong impression that a tax of sorts was expected to enter your room."

"You consulted with Jazz about how to bribe me, and came to the conclusion that torquing off Ratchet was a way to do it?"

"Exactly. You've already passed the requisite strength tests; Ratchet's reason for hesitation was he wanted you to have this appointment first." Rung handed over a ball of pliable, rubbery material, then took one for himself. "Get yourself used to squeezing and manipulating it," he said. "However feels natural." He smiled. "I find it useful for my own sake; the servos in my hands are very old, and have...difficulties, sometimes. It makes building my models difficult."

"Your models?" Megatron stared at the putty, trying not to drop it. None of this felt natural.

"I build ship models in my spare time. It's very enjoyable." Rung's own hands were deft, though now Megatron knew to look for it, he could see the slight hitches and hesitations of old joints.

"You're a psychiatrist. Were your hands also...?"

Rung frowned. "You know, I really don't remember. Information creep."

Megatron fumbled the putty and dropped it.

"Prosthetics always take time to integrate," Rung told him. "The temporary nature of these will probably make it more difficult for you, but think of it as practice for the next set. You handled the datapad well enough at today's press conference; you're doing well. How are you

feeling, after that?"

He was probably supposed to be feeling terrible, upset at acknowledging even in the most delicate way what had been done to him. Megatron debated lying to seem a little more normal, have Rung mouth some platitudes at him, and frag off. He could probably fake a 'normal' recovery.

It seemed like a lot of work. Let Rung deal with the fact he didn't need this. "Not much." He managed to rotate the putty in his hand without dropping it. "Not much since I returned."

"Hm," said Rung. "Would it surprise you to learn that's a fairly normal response?"

Startled, Megatron's head jerked up, and he dropped the putty. "What?"

"I should probably refine that a little," said Rung. "When you say 'not much', I'm supposing you mean you feel distant from your emotions, and, perhaps, your frame as well?"

Megatron shrugged, then ducked his head in a nod. "That's...more or less accurate."

"Often, people say that everything feels dreamlike as a result, even as if they themselves and the world around them are not fully real." Rung was watching him carefully now. "Firstly, it's a perfectly normal reaction to trauma, which is, bluntly speaking, what you've just survived." Megatron tensed; Rung immediately looked back to what he was doing with his hands. "It's a way we deal with terrible things, often when they're happening and sometimes immediately after, a form of escape. But afterwards, it's not uncommon for it to persist. I'd like to monitor that in you. It can worsen in severity, and if it's significantly impairing your daily life, we'll want to talk about ways we can intervene."

Megatron glared at his lap, not quite daring to glare at Rung. There was a great reluctance there, stale leftover fear. "I've been through worse," he said. "I survived."

"I know," said Rung. "This is, however, medical treatment, regardless of its focus on your processor rather than your frame. I am sure you had many injuries in the mines that healed on their own, perhaps even major ones that you and your colleagues dealt with yourselves?"

Megatron nodded again. "Yes." It was why he'd wanted to be a medic in the first place.

"Yet, if better treatment had been available, they would have healed far better."

"Yes."

"This is much the same. You've been through worse and recovered from it, but you don't need to do this alone. I'll be honest: the conditions that result from trauma are usually managed rather than cured. My hope is to give you the tools to manage the... "injury" for yourself, and be available to consult with you when those tools aren't fully equal to the situation, which sometimes they may be. If necessary, I can prescribe either code patches or medications to manage symptoms, if that will be more effective."

"So you're not going to ask me about my experiences as a newbuild or demand every gory detail of what they did to me?" He wasn't sure if he came across more challenging or surprised.

"You're in charge here, Megatron. It's your processor. I can push, but that's about it." This time, when Rung met his optics with a gentle smile, Megatron found himself able to look at him in return. "That's a blessing and a curse. It means you have control over what happens here, but it also means it may be a great deal of hard work when you least feel equal to it. Chemical interventions, as I noted, are in fact available, as is mnemosurgery, but I suspect you are disinclined to pursue the

former and actively repulsed by the latter."

"Since when is mnemosurgery available in my army?" The surge of anger and alarm was actually refreshing.

"As a therapeutic intervention requiring the full, witnessed consent of the patient, multiple interviews, and an affidavit from myself and another from Ratchet testifying that the individual both wishes to proceed with it and is either unresponsive to and unable to respond to other therapies," said Rung. "I'd advise against banning its truly therapeutic uses. There are some very cruel things a mech's processor can do to them, and in some cases, it's necessary to reverse the damages the Functionists inflicted."

He hated it as an idea, but the way that Rung was staring at him killed the objections in his intake. "I want to review the policies. And I don't want it used on me *ever*."

"Of course," said Rung. "Shall we continue?"

Megatron frowned and picked up the putty from where he'd dropped it. "Yes."

Megatron had escaped, Matrix in his chest, but Starscream wasn't going to wear that one. *That* unenviable prize was Tarn's. As soon as Optimus was conscious, Starscream had very apologetically explained at least part of the mess, enough to pass muster: he hadn't been paying attention, he'd only used Soundwave on Megatron, but Tarn, with their bad history, had become overenthusiastic when Soundwave's telepathy failed. Had tried torture, with Pharma's help—because of course, remember, Megatron had ordered Pharma's death and spirited Ratchet away, no wonder Pharma's anger got the better of him!—and had planned to kill Megatron and take the Matrix, but had felt Megatron too piteous and had mercy on him, showing that even Tarn, even in the midst of a sequence of truly bad judgements spurred by his own anger and grief, was a decent spark under it all.

Optimus, of course, ate it up, patting Starscream on the shoulder afterwards with his one good arm and saying, "You really do see the best in people when you try, Starscream."

"You set a good example."

Optimus sighed and sank back into his pillowed recovery berth. "It will make the diplomatic situation difficult."

"Very," Starscream agreed. "The Autobots have been taking full advantage of it, of course. Prowl did one extremely ugly press conference where they used the most circuitous language possible to make it sound as if Megatron's treatment was far worse than it really was, and then they hauled Megatron up there the next day." He had Optimus's attention. "They hadn't even finished his repairs and they'd given him claws, like an empurata victim. It was all lies—but very effective lies. I've heard rumors even here that we basically inflicted empurata on him, just as the Functionists would have."

Optimus sighed. "Tarn and Pharma will have to answer for their actions, even if they were understandable. They have placed us in an uncomfortable position, and what they did was, no matter their reasoning, wrong."

"Of course." Better and better. Not that Optimus had objected to similar treatment of other, less important prisoners, but let him have his moment of moral superiority.

Optimus sighed heavily again. "And Megatron went along with that, did he?"

"He knows how to play to a crowd, I'll give him that much at least. He was smart enough to keep it understated and to let his appearance make the more outrageous claims for him. Half of Iacon is clamoring about our cruelty right now; the other half is braying about the Autobot victory in Praxus. I think we can glean some sympathy from that; make a fuss about unlawful attacks and so on."

"Do so," said Optimus, and settled back with a sigh. Starscream knew better than to leave quite yet, and after a time Optimus said, "He's never coming back to us, is he."

"The Megatron we knew never existed," said Starscream, taking his hand and squeezing it. "Remember, he always had his own aims. His own motivations. We can't regret protecting our cause from them."

Optimus nodded curtly. "We can't falter now."

Megatron went back to his quarters and found his berth piled with a bewildering assortment of pillows, almost more a nest than a berth. Ratchet had encouraged him to sleep properly propped up, so there was a sort of medical justification for...some of those, he supposed. There was no medical justification for the pile of treats and snacks on one of the berthside tables, nor the set of very high quality speakers tucked away on some of his shelves, and his store of datapads seemed to have tripled in quantity. A quick search found that a significant number of them were the frankly trashy romances First Aid and Ratchet consumed by the shelfful. A good quarter of the remainders were spy novels. Someone with taste and good sense had supplied a pile of histories, but they'd been vastly outnumbered.

A peek into the washracks sent him into rapid retreat; the polishes and solvents littering the counter were frankly intimidating.

Well, it was pretty clear his Autobots weren't blaming him for what had happened. The warmth of that did a little to distract him from the awful empty feeling every time he glanced down at his hands.

Megatron sighed and looked around the room, muttered, "All of this is going to attract antroids," and braved the washracks, emerging once he smelled like something other than medbay. He settled into the berth, displacing pillows in all directions, then grabbed the foamed energon puffs, because those would go bad first, and a datapad at random.

"Medical Passion!" he read aloud, rolling his optics. "I can't believe First Aid's processor hasn't melted out of his audials by now." He grabbed a stylus before powering the datapad on, sure he'd find some egregious medical errors to correct. But someone had beat him to it, annotations and snide commentary, and the handwriting wasn't First Aid's, but Ratchet's.

He fell into recharge still snickering over the fifth page.

Chapter 97

"Okay, so, I get that you're on medical administrative duties only buuuuuuuut..." Rodimus threw himself over Megatron's desk so he landed with one pede propped up against the far edge, the other dangling off, and his head practically in Megatron's lap. He proceeded to look at Megatron with a loopy upside down grin, "what if you came and *rescued people* with me?"

He said *rescue people* like someone telling a newspark he could have spun lead filaments on his energon puff.

"Ratchet and Prowl would kill both of us?" Megatron offered, though, as far as he was concerned, Rodimus might as well be offering him a foamed energon puff. He desperately wanted to get out into the field. He didn't want to read reports about mecha who'd faced the same things he had. He wanted to save them. "They hid my weapons."

Rodimus cackled, rolled over, and pulled out the ion cannon. Megatron eyed it. "Where the frag were you keeping that?"

"I'd really rather not say."

Megatron just looked at him.

"My subspace, and let me tell you, comfortable it was *not*."

He shouldn't do it.

He really, really wanted to do it. There was only so much Rung's venting exercises could do for the need to be out there and *move*. The disgust at the idea of sitting still and being coddled while other mecha risked their lives.

He looked at the datapad. It would be fine if it waited a day. "All right."

"Frag yes!" said Rodimus, jumping to his feet. "Come on! I've got everything you need in the transport!"

Megatron followed, expecting to be accosted at any second by Jazz or Prowl. Rodimus treated the whole thing like a game, flattening himself against walls like a character in a spy holo. Megatron was pretty sure the mech would have been humming the theme from one of those holos if he thought he could get away with it.

Jazz and Prowl were evidently preoccupied with something else. Megatron was glad of it. He didn't want to have to explain to them why he was doing this—it was probably a very bad idea, and he couldn't come up with any other reason for doing it other than he felt like he'd burst if he stayed in his office any longer.

Maybe the secret to Rodimus's behavior was that he felt like that *all the time*. Megatron shuddered to imagine.

Maybe he'd have to tell Prowl to factor that into Rodimus's assignments.

Maybe Prowl already did and Rodimus was *still* like this.

They reached the transport and Rodimus hopped up and in. "You wanna drive, Megs? I

know you hate my driving! I know Ratchet would probably tell you it's too early but hey, you drive there, and I drive back, and you *know* I have to be careful driving back because people are delicate."

He didn't need much persuasion to avoid Rodimus's driving. "Certainly," he said. "Where are we going?"

"Little outpost just outside of town. Some of my guys just brought some folks in. We'll go and get 'em. They'll be impressed, you get the frag out of base, it all works."

In other words, something more or less without risk. Megatron frowned at Rodimus, who smiled maniacally back. "Beats sitting behind a desk, right? We'll beat up some bad guys next week."

Megatron sighed. "Rung put you up to this, didn't he."

"Nope, but he signed off on it so Ratchet won't kill my aft dead."

Megatron snorted. "Don't count on that."

"Yeah, but what else are friends for? Jailbreak when necessary." Rodimus's optics went wide and apologetic almost instantly. "Frag. Sorry. Um, didn't mean to um, bring up anything bad."

"You haven't," said Megatron, more amused than anything. Rodimus relaxed all at once.

"Keeping you all wrapped up safely back at base isn't going to help anything," he said firmly. "It'll just make you stir crazy while you feel all fragged up, trust me on this. At least Rung listened to me about it."

That *did* hurt Megatron's pride. So Rodimus and Rung were conspiring on how to take care of him, were they?

"Oh my Primus, quit sulking," said Rodimus. "Look, I can deal with Ratchet or Prowl being torqued off at me but have you ever actually had Rung disappointed in you? It's fragging sparkbreaking, mech. That sad little face with the big sad eyebrows looking up at you and he gets all quiet like he thinks it's *his fault*, I just can't take it. Besides, he'll hold the others off. Though that's not gonna do any good if you don't start driving."

Megatron started driving.

It felt good. This was something his hands could do, even just with the three fingers, and he didn't have to look at them doing it, which was important. It didn't make him feel like an invalid. It didn't make him feel like Tarn had taken everything away from him.

There was a horrible emptiness there if he thought about it too much, a reminder of all that Tarn had taken away, and maybe the worst part was how Megatron had kept Terminus in mind as he'd built the Autobots, hoping that they'd be a sort of shrine for his memory, thinking of how he'd hoped they'd have helped people like Terminus, and then Tarn had left it all smashed on the floor of a bombed-out building, had made the Autobots the very reason he'd rejected Megatron. Now Megatron felt truly alone, without the shadow-guide of the mech he loved to show him the way, flailing, alone. Like the first cave-in when he'd been very young, realizing that there was no supervisor to tell him what to do, tell him the way to get out, oppressor and guide gone at once.

"You know, I got along pretty good with Deadlock," Rodimus said, cheerfully. "He got it,

right? We came up through the same sort of place, except I started blowing slag up early on in my life, went more thief than paybot though I'm not gonna lie, did some of that too. But when you're good at stealing slag, Primus, it's pretty fun and if you're *real* good, you do pretty well and don't have to split the profits with anyone, right? And then the Enforcers are after you, maybe slag one of your buddies, and killing Enforcers gets fun as well. Sorta fair, too. Optic for an optic. 's how I got involved with the rebellion so early, right?"

"Right," said Megatron, still driving. It was startling that Rodimus would tell him this. He probably had a reason for it. It was probably supposed to be helpful. Megatron wasn't entirely sure how much more helpful he could stand.

"But no matter how nasty you get, how many of them you offline, you're still little and alone, and sometimes they just think you're prey. And sometimes, you don't get your aft out in time." Rodimus fell silent. Then, slowly, "I spent two years without a fragging vocalizer because of one of those fraggers. I got lucky, it was one of the kinds of damage that could be fixed. Problem was finding the medic to fix it. But I just spoke Hand for two fragging years because of it and every damn time I was thinking about his face and how it felt like he won."

He was silent a moment, then shrugged. "Never caught up with him, either. Bet he's a Decepticon now. Would be fun to see where he is." He smiled; like Megatron, he'd never filed his fangs down.

"Hm," said Megatron. "I might be interested in that as well."

"Great. Hopefully I won't need a lot of help."

They drove in silence a little longer.

"The point is," Rodimus said, carefully not making optic contact, "the world before you got shot—frag, even the world before we stormed out of the Decepticon base—sucked exhaust. A bunch of us have been where you are. Trusted the wrong mech, got fragged over. There's no shame in it. And we're pretty good at fixing people up and getting even, by now. We'll all get through this."

Megatron stared at the road ahead, wondering how he should feel about that. At last, he glanced at Rodimus and managed a smile. "Thank you," he said.

Tarn's back was still smoking a little from the beating, and his pride was even sorer. It was nothing compared with the acid in his spark at the thought of how he'd failed. Megatron was back with the Autobots, being further corrupted and corrupting in turn. He'd seen that press conference, Megatron parading his injuries like he was proud of them, using the upper classes' notions about Disposable savagery for his own purposes once more. Traitor wasn't a strong enough word.

"A word with you," said Starscream, overriding his door locks and walking into his quarters anyway. Tarn glared at him from behind his mask; Starscream, seeing he had already occupied the chair, sat on his berth with no apparent awareness of impropriety.

"What makes you think I'd be inclined to talk to you?"

"Very little." Starscream stopped examining his claws and looked him dead in the optics, his gaze steady and cold. "I threw you and Pharma to the scraplets. You want to know why I did it, or do you just want to hate me?"

He already hated Starscream. "You have my attention."

"If I hadn't given Optimus someone to blame, he would have turned on all of us. Do you know what a mess he'd make, leading the Decepticons? You know what he's like."

Tarn did know. Optimus didn't understand the army he led. Worse still, he didn't understand just how much he didn't understand. If he had, he never would have beaten Tarn with a plasma whip. Would never have placed himself in the role of a mine supervisor.

"Optimus has enough respect from the troops, and he's our one unifying point. No one else is even close. Not me. Not you. Certainly not Soundwave. His success is mostly because they don't know what he's really like. And they don't know how soft he can be about Megatron. He doesn't want the mech dead, he wants him leased and apologetic. That's never going to happen.

"We had to get him out of the way. This war won't end while he's alive. We couldn't do that with Optimus in the way. Megatron *had* to die while he was still in stasis. I entrusted that task to you, and you failed." Starscream saw the disgust in Tarn's optic and pressed his advantage. "You didn't fail me, you failed the *Decepticons*. I didn't need Megatron dead." Starscream stabbed his finger at the door. "They needed him dead. Optimus needed him dead, even if he can't stand doing the dirty work. And we can't let Optimus run the Decepticons into the ground, because his intemperate sentiment and his delusions will. He needs a hand on the reins. So if you thought I was going to sacrifice that, sacrifice the future of the Decepticons, because you had a moment of weakness—"

His voice had been unusually low and cold the whole time. It rose a little on that last sentence, and he silenced himself.

"*Some* of us are loyal to the Cause," he said at last. He rose. "I didn't need to tell you any of this, Tarn. But I'm in no mood to put up with your sullen disapproval."

The door snapped to behind him. Tarn stayed, staring, at the spot on his berth the Seeker had occupied.

Starscream was right and it shamed him. Starscream shouldn't be right; he was as intemperate as he accused Optimus of being, only his sin was selfishness, not mercy. But he was right. Optimus wasn't any good as anything but a figurehead. If he'd turned on all of them, it would have been disastrous.

But his back burned with pain and humiliation. Optimus had done it, but Tarn didn't mistake the real hand behind the blows, behind the chastisement. It was Starscream.

His hands clenched.

He had to wait, wait for the disgrace to fade and for the Decepticons to forget, but Starscream would answer for what he'd done.

One way or another, Tarn would find himself behind Optimus, pulling the mech's strings. He'd managed it with Megatron, before the Matrix, and Optimus was no Megatron.

The refugees actually rose when they recognized him, unfolding from their miserable huddle on the warehouse floor and looking at him with surprise and wonder. Megatron stared back at them, trying to understand. This wasn't about mecha seeing their Prime for the first time. Their

faces were wrong for that.

Then, as they started loading the transport, he saw one of the mecha grab Rodimus by the arm, heard him hiss, urgently, "What's he doing out here? We heard what they did to him, how can they let him be out here?"

"He insisted," Rodimus said. "What they did to him hasn't changed who he is. It's not going to make him hide. As long as he's online, he's going to be here for us."

Megatron knew enough not to stare. He went back to his work with the dawning realization that Rodimus was right. Tarn had hurt him. Pharma had taken his hands. But this, right here, was the core of the Autobots. The thing he'd sacrificed so much for, the extension of a helping hand when things were grimmest. The willingness to risk everything for a brighter future, a future when these horrors would be mere memories.

And no matter what Tarn had done or told him, he wasn't giving up on that. The universe would stop spinning sooner than he'd give up on that. No matter the horrors the Decepticons perpetrated, the future would be better. He wouldn't stop until it was.

So he squared his shoulders. He let them see his hands. He stopped worrying that they could see the whip weals. And he kept working. He let his mere presence be a statement of how thoroughly Decepticon brutality had failed.

Tarn had tried to dash all he'd built to pieces with his betrayal, but he hadn't. He'd dashed apart the *illusion* Megatron had carried, that he was building his kingdom for someone else's memory. For the dead. That Megatron himself was living a half-life, his true beloved gone, and that all that remained to him in life was the honoring of Terminus's departed, beloved spark.

No, he would build the cities of the future for the living. He would reshape the world, the universe. And he would do it not as a shade of himself, in perpetual mourning for a mech not even dead, but as Megatron Prime, the mech who'd risen from the lowest disposable to the true leader of the Cybertronian people, the mech who'd lived in defiance of all the injustice of their old world, and now lived to undo it, no matter where it still hid. No matter if it called itself Decepticon, using his own words to cover its ancient sin.

He was Megatron Prime, and he would no longer be deceived.

Chapter 98

There was a new steely resolve in Megatron's bearing after he returned from Rodimus's little jaunt, like he'd been looking for something out there and had actually found it.

Jazz had to admit it was a hell of a PR coup, given that they could now fuss about how Megatron had risen off his sickbed, the berth where he'd nearly died, twice, on Ratchet and gone off to save his people. But there was a new thing about how he moved, too, like an extra weight of certainty had come down on his shoulders. Like he'd actually settled into being *Prime*, not just a leader with a convenient artifact in his chest.

There were some pretty bad days too, of course. Jazz caught him a few times tugging at the fingers of his claws, plainly dissatisfied and unhappy, and he wrenched away from any confinement of his wrists with disgust and something like fear. But now he was pushing through that fear with a purpose, spending hours with Thunderclash, hours staring down into the strategy table with hooded optics, playing through predictions. And hours with Rodimus and the refugees.

If only Megatron's determination was enough to start pushing the Decepticons back.

But they were outnumbered and outgunned. A lot of mecha who'd otherwise have sided with them had taken one look at the Decepticon advance after Praxus and panicked. They were fleeing Cybertron in droves. People big and strong and nasty enough just defected when the Decepticon war machine rolled over them. At the end of the day, the people willing to stay and fight were... not really enough. They were the boldest of the refugees, and all the people who knew life under the Decepticons would be really bad for them, and their sheer pluck made up for a lot, but professional military they were not.

Frag, even a lot of the officers from the Elite Guard had defected to the Decepticons, even if they'd been Functionists. Apparently defection bought safety, and they were the sort of people who said, "Here comes the new boss, same as the old boss," when someone ordered atrocities, and then delivered those atrocities on schedule and in bulk.

So the Autobot soldiers and officers weren't experienced. Their scientists could run circles around Decepticon scientists, but were also less inclined to point the newest invention at a bunch of prisoners and pull the trigger. This was definitely a good thing, but meant the Decepticons were closing the gap in the arms race.

In short, everything looked like slag right now.

He sighed, softly, watching Megatron work. Megatron looked up from the map at him. "What is it, Jazz?"

"Just thinking," said Jazz, trying to keep his voice light. "Prowl's got all sorts of contingency plans. I don't like how quick we've been working our way down them. We need an edge, mech. Or a big victory."

"Yes, I was talking with Prowl this morning. We decided to trigger construction on the Ark project," said Megatron, then shook his head. "We'd better not need it. I am not leaving Cybertron itself to Optimus and his cohort of idiots."

You will if you have to, Jazz thought sadly, watching him. You'll do anything if you think you have to. To save us. To save what's important to you.

He wasn't always sure what that was. He trusted Megatron about it, though. Whatever had allowed him to get up again and get back to fighting after what Tarn had done, it wasn't about him, and it wasn't anything to do with the murderous gain the Decepticons embraced.

"We need a high-level defection," he mused aloud. "Or someone to just backstab Optimus. I think Starscream would run the Decepticons into the ground in a week if he was left to his own devices. He's not a bad tactician, but his habit is to play people off against each other, which would cause factional splits. Optimus keeps them together."

"We can wish," Megatron said. "In the meantime, we'll hit Helex as hard as we can—there's a large weapons research facility there, as well as a distribution center. We'll hit this," he pointed to a small collection of mines well outside of Tarn, "afterward; the precious stones there play an integral part in the refining of flightframe-grade fuel. Energy passed through them agitates the molecules of particular impurities, and is generally used to remove them. Destroy their access to those, and Starscream will be facing rebellion from his own air force."

"Well," said Jazz, hopping down. "Nothing left for me but to get to work on that assassination!"

Megatron had been considering this conversation all day; it didn't make walking into the medbay any easier.

He found Ratchet cleaning up, the sort of work he did even though he had assistants now, more than they'd ever had with the Decepticons. He went and leaned against the wall, waiting.

Ratchet looked up at him, then, as if he couldn't help it, briefly down at his hands, mouth tightening, then up at him again.

"Your signed annulment was on my desk this morning," Megatron said. "For your conjunx ritus. I sent it into the Hall of Records—you'll be getting the official notification in a few minutes, I think. I asked them to rush it."

"I hadn't checked," said Ratchet, sounding a little blank.

Megatron stepped toward him and put a hand on his shoulder. Ratchet looked at it sadly.

"It was an important step," he said. "And it doesn't matter what he did to me, Ratchet. What he did to you was bad enough."

Ratchet's face worked. "So Rung tells me," he said at last.

"And what he chose to do to me wasn't your fault, either."

That got a snort out of Ratchet. "You keep saying things like that, and I'll regret setting Rung on *you*," he said. He drew a vent. "Come on. I want to show you something. Percy and Brainstorm and Wheeljack and I have been working on some replacements for those."

"What about--"

"The other Empurata survivors? They've been progressing up the waiting list just fine, repairs to original hands go in a different queue than the full replacements, and besides, not even *you* get to tell us what to do with our time off." Ratchet brought over a box, then looked down at it and sighed a little. "Not that they've still got a lot of your original hands in them, and they're probably still going to need to be temporary, but they're better than your *current* ones. Or will be,

when we're finished."

He opened the box.

Megatron couldn't tell much of a difference between them and his original hands. They even still had the razor-sharp battlegrade claws at the tips. "I'm going to have to relearn how to operate without cutting people with those," he said, after a moment. "I suppose you'll want me to wear the claw-guards again."

"I don't know if you'll be able to operate with these," Ratchet said. "Forged hands—or Matrix-upgraded hands—well, we can't match them in quality, even now. But I guess it's something." He put the box away again, quickly, as if he were ashamed.

"You did what you could," Megatron told him. "That's nothing to be ashamed of. And I managed to operate before I got the Matrix. Somehow I doubt you and Perceptor and Brainstorm and Wheeljack all together could produce something *worse* than the standard-issue hands I online'd with."

He looked at Ratchet again. "Stop telling yourself that you've failed me. *You haven't*. Now, come on."

Ratchet frowned at him. "Come on *where*?"

"Get some fuel," said Megatron. "I've heard it's good for you."

"I want him *back*," Pharma snarled. "This is clearly a ploy of Megatron's—can *you* imagine Ratchet doing something this cruel? You know Ratchet! He wouldn't!"

Optimus looked sadly down at the official notification, sent through diplomatic channels. "Yes, Pharma," he said. "It is likely retaliation. Your actions were unwise, but they have not merited Megatron meddling in your relationship with Ratchet, nor his previous accusations."

Pharma shuddered. "He tried to have Jazz assassinate me because of a *lie*."

Optimus nodded. "It was unforgivable. We're fortunate that Starscream intervened."

"Please," said Pharma. "Send Deadlock after him. He can bring him back—I deserve a chance to fix things with him, Optimus. I know I disappointed you about Megatron, but I just wanted to make sure that opportunity didn't go to waste! This is my conjunx we're talking about, Optimus, please..."

He trailed off, shoulders hunching as Optimus's silence dragged on. "I'm sorry," he said in a small voice. "I know. Our personal needs have to come last."

Starscream, silent this whole time, finally spoke up. "Ratchet is the Chief Medical Officer for the Autobots. His absence, or defection, would strike a decisive blow against the Autobots at a time when they're taking serious losses. Megatron's injuries mean he'll be unlikely to take over. If it could be managed, it's a tactically sound decision."

Pharma looked at Optimus again, optics bright with hope.

"You may not get him back," Optimus warned him. He remembered too clearly his own hopes for Megatron, the crushing realization that the Megatron he'd loved was gone. At least he'd had Tarn to share it with. Pharma might not have that support.

But either way, the poor mech deserved closure, and Optimus himself wanted to look Ratchet in the optics and ask him why he'd chosen Megatron's destruction over the new world they were building. "Starscream, call Deadlock."

Deadlock arrived. The corner of his lip lifted slightly when he saw Pharma. Optimus sighed a little inwardly. Maybe it would make the two of them work together, for once. It might even be good for them.

"Deadlock," he said, drawing the mech's attention away from Pharma. "We have an assignment for you." Deadlock snuck another disdainful look at Starscream and Pharma. He was unlikely to be particularly cooperative or eager to work with either, so Optimus decided to be a little manipulative. It was all in a good cause. "It will be very dangerous," he said.

Deadlock snorted. "Good. It might actually be entertaining."

Deadlock's insubordination would have to be dealt with at some point. Optimus himself didn't really mind it—he knew Deadlock was a good mech, and good at what he did, but he worried about Starscream's response. "Deadlock," he said, admonishing. Deadlock turned his attention away from Starscream and Pharma and looked at him.

"All right, what is it?"

"I need you to capture the Autobot chief medical officer," said Optimus. "Not only will his absence cripple the Autobot medical corps, but unlike Megatron, Ratchet might yet be turned back."

He'd never seen Deadlock truly amazed before, he realized. The mech's mouth dropped a little open, and then he *glared* at Pharma, accusatory, enraged, arms tight across his chestplates. "Lord Optimus," he said, suddenly all formality even though he wouldn't even *look* at Optimus, "can I talk to you a moment?" Then, a sulky protoform remembering his manners, "please?"

Optimus waved the other two out. "Deadlock, this feud with Starscream and Pharma..."

"This isn't *right*!" Deadlock snapped. "Look, I get it, Starscream's good at his job. Great for him. Pharma? Pharma's a nasty piece of work and we all know it. You know what he was doing to Ratchet even when we were all in the Dead End? Did you? Did you know Ratchet was living in that clinic to get away from him?"

Optimus hadn't known that Ratchet had been living in the clinic at all; he'd assumed his friend's workaholic tendencies had been to thank for his presence at odd hours. Now, an awful suspicion took root in his mind, the truth under Deadlock's words.

"He's been trying to get away from Pharma as long as I've known him," Deadlock was saying. "Pharma beat the slag out of him, Optimus. And kept beating on him. I'm not handing him over again. You shouldn't either."

Optimus closed his optics and sighed. Pharma's accusations that Megatron had stolen his conjunx were far more literal than he'd expected. "Deadlock..."

"I saw it!" Deadlock insisted, pleading now. "I saw what he did! You can't just..."

"Deadlock," Optimus said, raising a hand to stop him before he kept repeating Megatron's lies. Ratchet had such a way of seeing the best in people, of adoring people he thought he could protect, of loving those in need, and Megatron's devotion to Ratchet in turn now made sense. So did his insistence that Pharma was the bad actor. Even Deadlock's accusations made sense. Pharma

was a proud mech. It was the sort of thing he could see provoking Pharma to violence. Pharma was a proud mech, and finding out that Ratchet had been unfaithful to him, that Ratchet had chosen Megatron over him even in that, must have deeply hurt. It was understandable that Pharma might have lost his temper. His actions had been wrong, but he deserved an opportunity to make it right, because what mech wouldn't have lost his temper?

Optimus himself still ached, realizing everything Megatron had pretended to have with him had been a lie. It hurt. It was amazing Megatron could still hurt him like this.

He had to remember, the Megatron he thought had existed never had.

"That's enough," Optimus said aloud. "Pharma deserves a chance. What happened to him with Ratchet, and Megatron's meddling, was deeply unjust. He deserves to speak to Ratchet directly. He deserves a chance to fix this. And if we can, we owe it to Ratchet to free him from Megatron's lies. Every sentient being deserves an opportunity for redemption."

Deadlock's fingers were tight on the edge of the table, like it was the only thing keeping him up. There was real horror in his face. He almost looked like he might cry.

Optimus put a comforting, not confining, hand on his shoulder. "Deadlock, Megatron lied to you about what happened to Ratchet. He told many lies to all of us. It's not your fault for believing them. It says a great deal about you—you are a good friend to Ratchet, and you're a good person for believing in him. But he has made grave mistakes. Now, more than ever, he needs you to be there for him. He needs you to *save* him, from himself."

"He came in with his nasal ridge broken," said Deadlock, quiet, a little broken, like the mech he'd been when Optimus had met him, the mech he so desperately tried not to be, "and his optic cracked."

It wrenched Optimus's spark. Of course this would be terribly hard for Deadlock. "Megatron lied to you, Deadlock. This is about helping Ratchet. He will not be hurt. Megatron lies, Deadlock, and he corrupts everyone he touches, encourages them to be the worst aspects of themselves. Ratchet can be saved, and he needs you to help him."

Deadlock seemed to recover himself a little at that. He didn't seem reassured, but his face lost that broken, questioning quality and his mouth firmed. He looked more like himself. "Yeah," he said. "Sure. Megatron—Megatron does ruin everything he touches. Everyone. What do you need me to do, boss?"

"No. No, stop that, you're ruining it," snapped Prowl. "Get your filthy great fingers out of that, Megatron, and put the battlefield plot back the way you found it."

Megatron just looked at him. "It's going to take most patients six hours of transport to reach the field hospital," he said. "Repositioning it here—" he kept moving the indicators, even when Prowl grabbed a plotting rod and started to angrily push the little figures back into place, "cuts evacuation time by three-quarters. We'll see significantly lower fatalities, and mecha are a limited resource for us, at this point."

"At the potential cost of *our medics' lives*," snarled Prowl, using the rod to pluck the figure indicating Thunderclash's unit out of Megatron's fingers. "There's a thirty percent higher chance of that being overrun. We're not risking it."

Megatron folded his arms. "Do you wish to explain to Ratchet why we're risking that many deaths?"

I don't."

"Yes, I'll explain it," snapped Prowl. "It's to keep people alive, is what it's for. Every medic we lose will take *years* to replace, and we can't *afford that*. No the point here is to go in, hit hard, and get out."

"And every soldier we lose, we can't replace," Megatron said. "Our recruits have slowed to a trickle, the neutrals have mostly *left the planet*, and the Decepticons are gaining ground by the day. We have to hit hard, but it has to matter, and we can't throw people away."

"You're not even going to be *in* the hospital," snapped Prowl. "You're going to be out with the vanguard, because we need someone to go toe-to-toe with Optimus and keep him out of the way of the main force, and he's not going to be able to resist a chance to go after *you*. Neither is Tarn. You keep the Decepticon heavyweights distracted, and we'll get the job done. So stop *fussing* about my *tactics*."

"So all those lessons you've had Thunderclash give me were for *show*?" Megatron loomed down at Prowl, who glared back with his head tilted back to the limits of his frame's capabilities.

"Aw, just kiss," Jazz muttered to himself, then waded in. "Mechs, mechs, you're both pretty. It's not an either-or kind of deal. Look, move the field hospital here, you get some natural coverage from the landscape, shave a few hours off transport time, and shave a bit of likelihood that Ratchet will be out in the field risking his own dumb aft, and yeah, it comes with a slightly raised chance of it being overrun by enemy lines, but we can defend it better and get patients there quicker, how's that?"

Prowl and Megatron stared at it, then leveled almost-identical glares at him.

"Whoops, look at the time, gotta go," said Jazz, and bolted. Behind him, the argument started again in earnest.

He would have been alarmed, but the (extremely loud, occasionally insulting) debates seemed to actually work. Prowl and Megatron's wits were pretty evenly matched, when it came down to it, and by butting heads, they seemed to be pretty efficiently knocking the rough edges off their plans.

Also he was pretty sure they were flirting. "Fighting is how Prowl flirts" wasn't exactly news to him, but Megatron reciprocating was kind of great. If the mech ever trusted *anyone* again, after Tarn. Ratchet might have replaced his hands, but Jazz knew the only reason the mech had decent dexterity with the things was the number of recalibration exercises he was doing, often under the table during logistics meetings.

Still, a mech could hope. Jazz didn't care what kinds of mental baggage Megatron brought with him, he was more than willing to take them on in a partner and totally unwilling to say as much to anyone involved. Let Prowl sort it out; like frag was Jazz crowding Megatron at a time like this.

Besides, if things kept up like this, the Decepticons would kill them all before anyone did anything about their little romantic tangle.

They'd clawed back a little with the destruction of Vos and the formation of the Autobot alliance, but the resulting Decepticon offensive was overwhelming. At least Megatron had authorized the Ark project; it was a good thing to have on their side, going into this.

But frag, did they need that victory—or assassination! Or defection. Jazz wasn't gonna be picky. Because if slag kept up like this? He was gonna have to start spending the lives of his agents

to claw survival-victories out of the Decepticon offensive, and that wasn't a winning strategy. That was just buying time for the Ark.

If he was honest with himself, they needed all three. Some Decepticon to defect. A victory, to raise morale and get *something* back. And Optimus had to die.

Fragging pity they were so unlikely to get all three.

Chapter 99

Deadlock had already made his decision. That was what was so scary about the whole thing. He'd made the decision in an instant. The second Optimus had started spouting about Pharma deserving a chance, he'd been gone, Decepticon brands ripped off, even if his body had still been in the room nodding.

Now, he was mostly torqued off about it. Fragging Optimus! What a fragging *idiot*. Starscream and Pharma wanted something else, and he just took them at face value, blamed any problems on Megatron, and ordered Deadlock to drag an innocent mech—and if anyone in this sinkhole of a planet *was* innocent, it was Ratchet, poor idealistic fool—back to a fragging torturer. What the frag did Optimus *think* Pharma wanted Ratchet back for? Someone who slagged a medic's hands—even if it was Megatron—wasn't just going to settle down with their mate and go back to playing house all nice. No, someone like Pharma would want to get even, first.

He was *not* bringing Ratchet back to that. He could still remember Megatron's screams just fine. He wasn't too fond of the mech, but imagining Ratchet's voice instead made him want to purge.

And Ratchet wasn't just going to abandon Megatron. Drift remembered how he'd acted around Megatron back in the clinic, and that was *before* Megatron had his whole brain back. He'd left with Megatron when it came to it, too.

And Optimus and Pharma were going to try and beat it out of him and say it was for his own good. Didn't they realize how much they sounded like the Functionists? The way they'd tell you it was to help you while they ripped your face off?

He glared off the roof of the command center, arms folded. He was proud of his new skills. He was proud of being a vicious fragger you shouldn't cross. But here Optimus and Starscream and Pharma were, ordering him around like the thought he was still a disposable body. No inconvenient mind attached, no decisions to be made. Do what you're told and make your masters happy.

Deadlock's lips lifted in a snarl. He'd been caught in the same trap again, just repainted, and there weren't enough words in the universe to encapsulate just how repulsive it was. Except this time, he'd become one of Overlord's enforcers, rounding some poor mech up to serve his master's pleasure. With that realization came another—not a lot more freedom in being a boot than a face. You just paid the price with someone else's pain, which was one thing when they were a slagger who deserved it anyway, like one of the penalty administrators from a mine, and something totally different when the mech was *Ratchet*, a dumbaft who'd been trying to help in the worst places on the planet before anyone thought it was *cool*.

Someone reset their vocalizer next to him.

Deadlock looked over without turning his head. Tarn was there.

"Say your thing and say it fast before I throw you off the roof," Deadlock said. "You got ten seconds."

Tarn sighed. "I think it's interesting the Autobots got Turmoil's personal authorization codes to open Megatron's cell," he said. "Of course, Turmoil had an uncomfortable few days of it. Vortex does think protestations of innocence are negative performance reviews."

Deadlock snorted. At least something had gone sort of right.

"You knew Megatron, before. And you hate Turmoil," said Tarn, then turned around, pacing back to the stairs. He paused before descending and added, "Some things are a little too convenient to be ignored, Deadlock. And I might be out of favor just now, but you can trust me that I'll be watching you."

Deadlock watched him go.

So much for preparing. When he did it, whatever he decided to do, he'd need to improvise.

At least he was good at that.

Jazz's raid on the crystal manufacturing facilities had yielded some result; a 50% decrease in Decepticon flightframe fuel processing. Now, they could turn their full attention to the attack on Helex. At least the issue of where to put the field hospital was settled.

It was easy to ignore the pain in his spark and simply work. When the horror or the grief threatened to roll over him, flooding his engine and choking his voice into silence, Megatron reached for his work. The phantom press of Tarn's hands on his head faded when he imagined Decepticon lives ending under his axe, Optimus falling back before him without enough energy to talk. He'd kill them for this. Kill as many as he could, wade through rivers of energon just to end one more Decepticon. They'd destroyed his world, they'd destroyed the life he wanted, and he knew from his dreams the thousands, the millions of innocents who'd fallen to them as well.

He'd had enough of pain. It fueled him now, and having turned it into fuel, it ceased to be important. He'd been built to endure millennia of abuse and neglect under millions of tons of rock. And now he had something to fight for; stopping the Decepticons from destroying the first glimmer of freedom their species had known in at least five million years, if not longer.

If he fell, another would rise to take his place.

So he worked and he planned. He took comfort in the faces of his Autobots, in their assistance and their competence and their shared purpose, their willingness to lay down their lives to stop the Decepticons. Sometimes, the images of those faces still and dead or agonized in the last throes of life passed before his optics, but the knowledge of the horrors that would befall them if they failed, of Pharma turning his attentions on Ratchet's hands, of Tarn at work on Jazz, made mere death seem a small thing. It would be an eternal Pit for all of them if they faltered, if they gave in.

He was glad he'd set aside the medic's oath now. He would have spent every moment of every day longing to break it. They were desperate, they were surrounded, and if the way out was over the corpses of Decepticons, well, nothing would bring him more joy. They'd taken his hands. He didn't have a chance of being anything other than Prime. The Prime who would save his people by killing their enemies, tyranny new-sprung from the very soil that should have smothered it.

"I'm glad to see the progress you're making," said Rung, smiling a little at him, and Megatron hid the hardening of his purpose behind a pleasant smile of his own and nodded as well and saved up little incidents to placate Rung with, to make sure Rung had no cause for alarm. He talked about his fears of those dead faces, his fear that Ratchet might fall into enemy hands, and allowed himself to seem comforted by Rung's platitudes when he'd come to his own conclusions, his own comforts.

Optimus, Lord of the Decepticons, Emperor of Destruction, would die at his hands and his Decepticons would fall with him. No matter the cost.

It might not be this battle. It might not be the next. But Cybertron would not be theirs.

Megatron worked with Prowl. They made layers of plans, plans within plans and contingency plans surrounding them all, outthinking at every turn, outmaneuvering the shades of their enemies. For this battle. The next.

For even the Ark project, should it come to that. Better they lose Cybertron and live to fight again than fall with their world. Megatron agreed with Prowl on that. But he was determined that they would never need it, because he would make certain they would never need it. The Decepticons would not win. They would not free Cybertron from the Functionists just to replace them with a cheap facsimile. The Decepticons might have succeeded where the Functionists had failed in taking any possibility Megatron had had of being a medic, but they would not take Cybertron's choices from it.

Megatron would not allow it, and if the price of that was wading through rivers of their energon, he'd pay it with joy in his spark.

"Of course you're going to be on the field," said First Aid to Ratchet, resigned. Ratchet just glared at him and kept heading for the stairs. It had been a long day, and he was trying to take Megatron and Rung's advice about taking some breaks more seriously. Wasn't like they'd have the luxury for them again if things kept going the way they were.

"You realize we're going to be in a lot of trouble if you get slagged, right?" First Aid folded his arms. "Being CMO would be great, but no way am I ready yet. I can't read your handwriting and you never file anything on time; it'll be an administrative nightmare."

"Megatron can't do it anymore," Ratchet said, bluntly. "He used to be able to be an advance medic on top of everything, but not with those hands now, not anymore. So yeah, I'm going to be on the field."

First Aid deflated. He always did, as soon as Megatron was mentioned. Ratchet was pretty sure the kid felt bad about not being able to fix Megatron's hands. It wasn't really his fault. The damage Pharma had done wasn't fixable, not really, and Aid didn't have the experience Ratchet did. No, the blame mostly lay with Pharma.

Even if all of Rung's best efforts weren't enough to convince Ratchet that he wasn't in some way responsible for making Megatron a target in the first place.

"Besides," Ratchet said, "he's got more important slag to do. Decepticons to fight." He turned the corner, heading for the back door.

"Do you ever worry about him?" First Aid asked, hurrying after him. "He's a medic, like us. Do you ever worry about what it's doing to him?"

The doors of the hospital opened and they were on the streets of Iacon, filled with nervous mecha who weren't nearly as nervous as they should have been; they had no idea what was coming. Ratchet looked around sadly, seeing for a moment broken towers and smoke, screaming, the smell of energon. They were fragged. Anyone with sense should have left with the neutrals.

"Kid," Ratchet said, "I worry about all of us."

The attack would be tomorrow.

They were both going.

"I still have my doubts about this," Prowl said, curled around Jazz. "The three of us are—"

"The highest-ranking Autobot officers," said Jazz. "I know. But they need all three of us there. We might be losing, but our chain of command is solid, and I trust Thunderclash and Tyrest to take over if the worst does happen. We need this fight, Prowl. We need to draw them out and hit them hard and then get the frag out of there. If we do that, we're not looking at evacuating Cybertron this century. Even without damage to the Decepticon chain of command, it buys us time we need for the Ark project."

Prowl sighed heavily. "I am in agreement with you, which is why I approved the plan. It doesn't mean I like it any better."

Jazz nestled up against him, smiling. "I know, love. I know. I'll be careful. How's Megs?"

Prowl went quiet.

"That bad, huh?"

"You remember my reservations about him," Prowl said slowly. "I've been watching him. I'm worried."

"We're all close to that tipping point," said Jazz softly. "Some might argue we crossed it with Vos."

"I'm less concerned about Megatron's deeds than Megatron himself," said Prowl. "After what Tarn did—how tempting is it to escape something like that by not being a person anymore? By only thinking of what needs to be done?"

Jazz turned over and looked him in the optics. "You went down that road after Praxus," he said.

Prowl looked away. "You can't come back from it."

Jazz thumped him lightly on the shoulder. "You *have* come back," he snapped. "In the ways that matter. I'm not taking any of that 'I'm a monster' talk from you, my mech. You're right here, with me. You feared for Megatron with me and you courted him and we rescued him. I've watched you make decisions to save lives, I've helped you—you're still my Prowl, and I know those decisions still hurt you. You're where you need to be right now. We have to make those decisions, yes. But that doesn't mean we're not holding onto what's important. That doesn't mean that we can't."

Prowl blinked, then pulled him in tight. Jazz grabbed him and held on.

"And if we see Megatron reaching that tipping point," Jazz said, fiercely, "We're gonna pull him back, you and I, because he's our Prime and he's our *friend* and maybe one day when he's recovered more from what Tarn did to him he'll also be our conjunx, and I'm not losing him to this any more than he and I lost you. You're here Prowl, and we're gonna keep him here too, my spark gutter if we don't."

Prowl didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

"I love you two so much," whispered Jazz. "I'm not losing you. Not either of you."

Prowl just petted his doorwings.

"We'll worry about it if we live through tomorrow," he said.

Jazz vented a few more times before saying, "Yeah. Sounds like a plan."

Chapter 100

Deadlock was just someone persuading himself that he wasn't as gullible as Drift had been.

The realization fragging hurt. But it made him angrier which was good, because he needed to be *really* angry for this to work.

Deadlock piled onto the transport with everyone else, ignoring Pharma's sly wink at him. Kidnapping Ratchet off a battlefield would be the easiest way to grab him. It was why Pharma seemed to believe his reasons for putting this off. That was good.

Deadlock wasn't going to grab Ratchet, though. He was going to protect him. And he was going to defect.

He hadn't got much further on the plan than that.

Pharma plopped down next to him, smirking. Probably thinking of what he was going to do once he had Ratchet. Deadlock felt his tank flop sickly at that, remembering Megatron's screams. Megatron didn't scream easy, he'd learned that much back at the clinic. Overlord's bullies had just made him angry.

Pharma could smirk all he wanted. This wasn't going to go all his way.

"Frag off," he said. "Just because I'm fetching your chewtoy home doesn't mean I like you."

"I'm coming with you," Pharma announced. "To make sure it's done right."

To start in on him before Optimus realizes what you're up to, more likely. Deadlock darted a hateful glance at Pharma, who was still smirking. *Yeah, smile away. I know what your sort is like, Pharma.*

"Suit yourself," he said aloud. He could take the little fragger in a fight. Decepticons would probably be better off without him.

The transport sagged as another mech climbed on. Deadlock glanced up. Tarn. Tarn, staring right at him. He bared his dentae.

Tarn looked away, dismissive.

Deadlock contemplated murder.

There were a lot of things about the Decepticons he wasn't going to miss. Didn't mean he was thrilled about spending the rest of his function fighting to protect a bunch of spoiled whining Autobots, but being able to shoot the smug out of Tarn's ugly mask was probably gonna be worth it.

Who was he kidding, it was also because he couldn't, he just couldn't, hand Ratchet over to these monsters. Ratchet had been one of those rare good ones, a little stuck up, but still good. And Deadlock was done accepting people like that as collateral damage.

Turmoil slunk onto the transport. Deadlock found himself brightening up.

Defecting meant he could shoot Turmoil as well.

Megatron didn't get to take the field until the battle was joined. Part of his role was to be big and obvious and to get Optimus's attention away from the main Autobot advance, which meant that a lot of that advance had already happened by the time anyone handed him his axe or ion cannon. He checked his subspace—the surgical kit he still had in there out of habit, axe, shield, cannon, a variety of nasty little surprises Wheeljack had pressed upon him, spare rations—and keyed open the door to the temporary command center, weak light falling over him, already orange with smoke. He vented, long and deep, rolled his shoulders, reminding him of the stinging pull of the still-healing whip weals. Below him, the battle raged, Autobot and Decepticon identical at such a distance.

He watched a long moment, feeling the anger seethe within him, that this was the price exacted of his Primacy, of justice for all the Disposables like him. Optimus had ruined it, destroyed it, while pretending he fought for them.

One vent. Then another. There were still ghosts of pain in his body, the memories of what the Decepticons had done to him. Pain made him fight better, harder. He couldn't afford to let it do otherwise.

"Let's go," he told Jazz and Prowl, and charged down the slope at the battle with a roar.

"Autobots, RISE UP!"

Megatron's voice brought Optimus's helm up like a pneumapuma scenting its prey. There. There he was, a perfectly staged entrance timed for drama rather than effectiveness—too late to save the Autobots already smashed at Optimus's pedes. Optimus shook his helm sadly. To think Megatron claimed he had anyone's best interests at spark. It was obvious he didn't.

He powered up his fusion cannon, and went to stop Megatron.

The flash of red and white caught Deadlock by surprise. He couldn't believe Ratchet was stupid enough to expose himself like that on the field. Shouldn't he be back in the hospital, guarded? Deadlock shook his helm, fiddling with the knife in his hands. He didn't want to be waving a gun around Ratchet's helm while pretending to kidnap him. Too much might go wrong. He was going to have words with Megatron about that, that was for sure.

Pharma cleared his intake beside him. "Come on, go get him," he said, fractious as a protoform.

Deadlock looked down at him. Pharma puffed up. "Go get him," he said. "That's an order. I outrank you. He's distracted, it's fine."

He was transforming a hand as he spoke, a quick flicker through tools. Welder, chainsaw, scalpels, optics fixed on Ratchet's distant form, a manic smile on his face.

"Come on," he said. "He has to pay."

Deadlock saw the tense of cables, a mech preparing to spring, and reacted.

The knife was *very* sharp.

No matter how he loathed Optimus, fighting the fragger was invigorating. Megatron met him roaring, catching the first blow of his morningstar on the haft of his axe and slamming it aside. Optimus's obscene fusion cannon was humming with charge; Megatron dashed it aside with a blow

of his arm as its charge squealed up, and the blast that would have slagged him went into the ground, boiling and evaporating the metal. He turned it into a punch, landing a satisfying blow to Optimus's face.

"Surrender, Megatron. This is futile!"

He hadn't punched hard enough. Megatron laughed in Optimus's face by way of a response and headbutted it, stepped in close and kicked Optimus in the knee, hard. Optimus stepped back with the kick, saving the joint but losing ground. Megatron roared and pulled his axe free, swinging it back at Optimus's head.

Optimus ducked, coming up under his guard, and Megatron threw himself backward, away from the claws that would have eviscerated him. He swung again, aiming to take Optimus's hand off at the wrist, but Optimus dodged and pivoted to kick. Megatron's sidestep let him take the blow on the armor of his arm and shoulder, rather than full in the chestplates.

"Come on, Optimus," he said. "I thought you Enforcers were supposed to be trained for this. Or are you afraid to face me without Tarn at your back?"

Optimus had decided to give Pharma his toy back, but Tarn was done listening to Optimus. Ratchet's real importance didn't lie in his relationship to Pharma. It was in his relationship to Megatron. It was in the way he'd corrupted Megatron back in the Academy, tempting him with luxury, twisting him into something weak. He should have seen it, but he'd been *weak* as Terminus, weak and foolish.

Ratchet was going to pay. Ratchet was going to pay, and that was how Tarn would *break* Megatron. He knew how he'd left Megatron. The mech had to be holding onto his sanity by the tips of his claws. Look how he fought Optimus, snarling and hatred, optics blazing, fangs bared. Anger, and if he got pushed further, despair.

Tarn was going to push him.

Tarn was going to take Ratchet away from him. There wasn't anything Megatron loved as much, certainly not his mewling coward Autobots.

He could use his voice, but there was something visceral in imagining Ratchet's plating crumpling under his hands. In imagining leaving injuries Megatron couldn't fix. Yes. Make him helpless.

Destroy him.

So what if he'd worked his way into the thick of the battle. Mecha needed him. And he wasn't letting Megatron out of his sight. This was where he needed to be.

But Primus, please let it be over soon. There was something in Ratchet that writhed with horror, seeing the twisted blank gasping faces of the wounded, mecha lost in a private hell. He hated this. He hated this so much.

He'd never tell Megatron, though.

He didn't want to see the young mech blaming himself for how much it cost him. He'd pay it, and more, because there was so much he hadn't been able to protect the kid from. So, so much. He'd said goodbye to Pharma for good, and it *was* good, but all the cadre he had left were Megatron and Aid, his trainees, his students, even if Megatron couldn't ever be the medic he wanted to be

because of Pharma. Even if Megatron couldn't, Ratchet was going to help him be the best person he could be, he was going to be *there* for him.

"Ratchet."

Ratchet looked up at the familiar voice. He'd been imagining this, but it was somehow worse. The mech was if anything a little bigger than Megatron, probably the rebuild, all sharp edges and treads and a mask like a nightmare. His hands were taloned, the turrets that framed his helm a silent threat, his colors dull in the orange battlefield light that turned the brightest armor muddy and the shadows green.

His fists clenched. He rose. The patient he'd been tending was stable. He could do this. He squared his shoulders and raised his arms in the position Ironhide had taught him, all that time ago. He wasn't retreating this time. He wasn't going to let this fragger slag his patient. He wasn't going to let him get away with this. "Hear you're calling yourself Tarn now. It's a stupid name."

"I'd kill you," said Deadlock, stuffing the severed hands in his subspace, "but honestly I want you to squirm more. You did this slag to Megatron. You told him these weren't replaceable. So guess what, you get to experience the same thing. Frag you. You're the worst thing about Cybertron, and you're never, ever touching Ratchet again. Not while I function."

Pharma looked up at him from where he'd curled over himself, sobbing over the stumps of his wrists. "You—!"

Deadlock looked at the knife a moment, then kicked Pharma in the chestplates, following through to pin him to the ground. He flipped the knife around in his hand and stabbed the long blade down through Pharma's abdomen. Pharma screamed.

"You had the best mech in the universe in love with you," Deadlock hissed in his audial. "And you did *that* to him. You don't even deserve to die nice, Pharma. I'm gonna leave you here. Let's see if *Starscream* remembers you exist before you *leak out*. Until then you can think about living without your precious fragging hands."

"You'll pay for this!" Pharma shrieked, scrabbling at the knife hilt with his wrists as Deadlock stood up. Deadlock stared down at him a moment, then used his foot to drive the hilt of the knife in deeper.

"I'm going to fragging kill you," snarled Pharma. "I'm going to fragging kill you, Deadlock, you hear me, I'm going to—"

"Nah," said Deadlock. "It's Drift now. Besides, you're gonna need some hands to kill me." He pulled one out and dangled it at Pharma.

Pharma screamed at him about it, but he turned and took off running across the field, toward the Autobot line.

He had to find Ratchet.

Megatron was laughing at him like a madmech. He fought like one too. He'd gotten better training, Optimus guessed. At least he was willing to do his own fighting.

"You'll never hold Cybertron, Optimus," Megatron spat, blocking yet another blow of Optimus's axe, vitriol unhindered by the evident joy he took in destruction. "Not while I function."

Not while any of my Autobots function. We'll never bow our heads to your tyranny, and it will give me the greatest pleasure to kill your lackeys, even if I have to wade through *rivers* of energon to do so!" He jabbed a punch into Optimus's unprotected midsection.

"You have your desired devastation," said Optimus. "Spare me your warmongering, Megatron. Your hatred will not prevail."

"My hatred?" said Megatron. "What do you call a millennia of a boot in your *face*, Optimus, what do you call the overseers you fragging hired on as soon as they made nice enough?" He sprang after Optimus with incredible speed, slashing a blow across Optimus's abdomen. Optimus blasted at him; he dodged, still charging, catching Optimus's morningstar with the haft of his axe and shoving it up, pressing close to snarl into Optimus's face. "Your Decepticon Empire is built on *lies*, *Orion Pax*. You didn't deserve my writings, you didn't deserve to be my intellectual *heir*, everything great about your Decepticons is *stolen*, and one day they're going to wake up and realize *they are being deceived*. And my Autobots, we'll bring it *tumbling*—"

Someone screamed, close by, and Megatron froze, the gleeful hatred running out of his face like energon from an artery. It took Optimus a moment to place the voice, but the second shriek did. Megatron's optics weren't focused on him anymore; his expression had gone to blank, naked horror, his clenched fist slackening.

"Ratchet," he whispered, rough and small, a mech pleading with the universe, and Optimus's spark blazed with hope because that was the voice of the Megatron he knew. Then Megatron's optics snapped back into focus. A powerful kick slammed into Optimus's midsection, lifting him off his feet and back, and when he'd rolled upright again, Megatron was running from him, his axe abandoned on the ground at Optimus's feet.

Beyond him was Tarn, Ratchet's limp form uplifted in one hand like a scruffed turbofox.

Drift saw Tarn behind Ratchet as Ratchet realized he was totally fragged and tried to get away, saw the mech's hand punch through Ratchet's back like it was foil and come through the other side. He was aware, faintly, of screaming a denial.

And on the other side of the field, Megatron froze in his battle with Optimus, turned, saw Ratchet, and ran to him, the axe falling from his grip.

Optimus went after him.

Drift threw himself into motion before he realized what he was doing, going for Optimus's throat.

He slammed into the mech's abdomen, bringing him to the ground.

"You know the difference between you and Megatron?" he snarled into Optimus's shocked face. "He fragging cares. He fragging gets us, you fragger. You're still an Enforcer!" He punched him, hard, rolled away so he could pull a blaster. "Now fight me! Fight the mech who can actually defend himself! Oh, I forgot, you're really bad at that!"

Maybe Optimus would have launched into one of his fragging speeches, but Drift just shot him in the arm and he charged instead, which was much better.

The blaster wasn't going to do frag all at this range. Drift dropped it and grabbed a sword from a dead mech's hand.

Optimus might usually have outclassed him, but Drift had been one of the mecha to bring him in after he'd fallen on the field.

He knew where Bluestreak had shot him.

Megatron didn't even fully register it was Tarn, not at first. He'd heard Ratchet's screams. He'd turned, seeing Ratchet limp and dangling, and he'd run, his optics filling in the terrible details as he came closer. The energon painting Ratchet's front and sides pink. The way Tarn's talons had punched through him from behind, plating bowed out and tearing, the way the talons flexed in the wound, tearing. Ratchet's lolling head and the energon on his face, dripping from his mouth, his optics white with pain, his spasming limbs. The puddle on the ground, casting a pink glow up on them both.

The memories of textbooks, of the probable damage.

He's going to die, came clear into Megatron's spark, like a knife cutting him to the center, like a wound so deadly he hadn't even felt it yet. *Ratchet's going to die*.

Something snapped. The world came into clear, terrible focus and everything stopped mattering, everything but the mech in front of him.

"Glad I have your attention," said Tarn, and threw Ratchet away from him. Megatron didn't see where he'd landed. Didn't look.

Nothing mattered but Tarn. His death. The death of every Decepticon on this battlefield. Megatron didn't—couldn't—think beyond that. He surged forward.

"This ends here." It didn't sound like his voice, and abruptly he realized that was the Matrix, a vicious undercurrent. "This. Ends. Here."

"It had better," said Tarn, and charged to meet him.

"Can we get Aid here in time?" demanded Prowl, as Jazz went to his knees next to Ratchet's limp form. "Can we get any of the medics? Can you stabilize him?"

"You call Aid," said Jazz. "I'm busy. We'll see. Get Arcee to cover our backs." His fingers were slipping in the energon. This was nothing like the field repairs he'd done on himself; they were somehow worse. He probably would have told one of his agents to start making nice with Primus, if they had something like this wound. "Prowler?"

"No medics near us," said Prowl, his voice tight. "They'll have to fight their way over. Not sure they can make it. Three are trying. They won't get here in time."

Jazz dared a glance up at Megatron and Tarn, then back into the ruin that had been Ratchet's back and chest. "You know how we gotta keep him from tipping over that edge?"

"Yes," said Prowl.

Jazz's fingers slipped again. "We gotta save him, Prowler," he said. He wasn't sure if he meant Ratchet or Megatron, but they were pretty much one and the same. "We gotta." His vents hitched. "And I can't."

Drift was pretty sure half his internal systems were mashed into an unidentifiable pulp, but Optimus's guard on his left side was down, and if he could muster enough energy to jump high enough to slam the sword, any part of the sword, into the still-healing wound, he'd have the battle. "Come on, you fragging coward," he snarled, and spat energon. "Come on, you scared of me, Optimus? You scared? Fragging Enforcer. Gotta have a buddy to go to the bad parts of town, huh?"

"Deadlock, please, be reasonable," said Optimus. "Don't make me kill you."

"Don't call me that!" Drift spat at his feet. There was a *lot* of energon in his mouth. "That was only my name when I was being fooled by *you*."

Optimus lunged at him, bending as he did. Drift dodged, forced his tired limbs into a leap, and slammed the pommel of the sword into the side of Optimus's neck, smashing through the new metals and into the relay underneath.

Optimus clanged to his knees. Drift hit the ground hard, skidded. His helm slammed against something. The world swam nauseatingly. He tried to push himself upright, purged, and fell back.

Just... lying here for a minute sounded like a great idea, frag the instincts that clamored at him to get moving. Yeah. He'd just lie here. For a minute. Get back to kicking aft.

"Finally!" snarled Tarn. "Finally, you've found your spirit! And for such a selfish reason, too!"

Megatron didn't respond. He had his bare hands, he'd dropped his axe and cannon. The fight had stopped being a venting of his rage and was now desperately hard, because Terminus's rebuild had made him terribly strong. Megatron found himself fighting like Arcee fought, trying to stay out of range and striking only when he was sure he wouldn't take a blow in turn. Intellectually, he knew he might well lose this battle, but he didn't care. It was better than going over there and seeing what Ratchet was.

He would kill every Decepticon on this field before he went and saw that. He would *die*, sooner.

Tarn backhanded him out of the way, and the vents went out of Megatron's frame as he hit the ground. He scrambled to his knees, gasping.

"You failed him," said Tarn. "You failed everyone who ever believed in you, Megatron. Who ever *loved* you. Me. Optimus. Ratchet. You failed us. You were weak. You buckled to luxury and indulgence. And you failed us all."

Tarn raised a hand, still grimed with Ratchet's energon, claws long and sharp. "I was going to make you live with that," he said. "That you were self-centered and thoughtless. That you let your own cause down. But you might as well die knowing that. I let you live *once*. I can't put getting what I want from you over the Cause again."

Megatron threw himself to the side, so Tarn's claws scored a glancing blow rather than tearing into his chestplates.

"You weak, petty fool," said Tarn, closing the distance. A hand slammed into Megatron's shoulder, pushing him backwards, and Tarn's knee came down on his hip joint, pinning him. "Die, knowing that everyone who ever loved you knows how pathetic you were. How selfish you were."

Megatron snarled, trying to get a leg under himself to buck Tarn off. Tarn's vents gusted

down on him, hot and awful, reminding him of Overlord and stirring old panic.

Megatron's optics widened.

Ratchet had left him one last present. One last defense, reinstalled under the armor of his right arm.

He reached up like he was trying to shove Tarn off him with a hand on his chest, bent his wrist so the concealed blade sprang out, crunching into Tarn's chestplates above his spark. Tarn threw himself backward but Megatron rolled up and came with him, throwing his full weight forward and down. The blade drove in deeper, pulling down. He felt the resistance of the sparkchamber, his central power core and before Tarn could scream it gave, slashing him nearly in half from the chest down. Megatron staggered back, vents heaving, smelling processed energon. Tarn raised his head a little after he hit the ground, like he meant to say something, but instead his optics faded black and his head fell back onto the metal with a thump.

"The only selfish thing I did was not killing you," Megatron told the corpse.

He turned to look over his shoulder. Optimus was there, staring back at him with his blue optics wide in horror over his mask, his morningstar fallen from his hand. He was on his knees, the left side of his body totally limp. He wouldn't be much of a fight.

Every single Decepticon on this battlefield would pay for Ratchet. Megatron snarled and leaped for the other mech, with the full intention of doing the same to him, here, now. So what if he was helpless? *Ratchet* had been helpless. Hadn't stopped Optimus from sending his goons after him. Hadn't stopped Tarn from killing him.

Optimus dies, the Decepticons fall. Jazz's advice.

They would *pay*.

Something yanked him back so hard he almost fell. Two somethings—Jazz and Prowl had caught hold of his arms, and the sudden resistance was enough to put him off balance. "Stop! Ratchet!"

He almost shook them off. Almost threw them, the better to attack them, get them out of his way, but Jazz's voice, sharp and desperate, pulled him back from it, and he blinked.

"Ratchet needs you!" said Jazz, pleading. "Aid's not gonna make it in time. Megatron please, he ain't worth it!"

"He's not worth it," repeated Prowl, and when he looked down at his second in command, the mech stared back at him with frightened optics. It jolted him the rest of the way out of the rage, because Prowl should never look at someone like that.

"We're going to lose Ratchet," said Jazz. "We need you."

"How?" said Megatron, his voice harsh. "I can't—"

"You're going to have to," said Jazz. "Come on, you could operate on me in that smelting plant, you can do this. He's alive, Megatron, he needs you."

Megatron stared at Optimus. At the limp bloody form of Deadlock behind him, his armor all but in ribbons.

"Yeah," said Jazz. "He kept Optimus off you. Come on. Don't let what he did go to waste."

Megatron went, one staggering step after another, and reached almost on instinct for the surgical kit in his subspace.

He couldn't look at Ratchet's face as he went to his knees. He couldn't look at anything but the gaping hole in him. There was a lot of energon. He yanked the energon transfer line out and set it up, barely noticing its sting as it ate through his chestplates, plugged it into Ratchet even as he finished sealing the lines Jazz hadn't, cleaning as he went. Pads to absorb the energon. Quickly wipe the exposed inside of the fuel tank and seal it off so the fuel pump stopped intaking air. His own fuel would chase the last of the bubbles out. The sparkchamber was punctured and bent. He pulled out the cutter and carefully excised the part that was actively putting pressure on the spark. Better it be open than crushed. One spark landed in a pool of energon that he hadn't managed to clean and erupted into immediate white flame. He smothered it with a palm, heedless of the burns. His own fuel levels dipped into the red. "Jazz. I've got a cube in my subspace. Hand it to me."

Jazz did. Megatron drained it in a few quick gulps and threw it aside. He overrode his own fuel processing, routing it around the filters to get it into his lines and into Ratchet faster. "I'll patch this, then I'll need another. I'm going to run both of us off my systems. We'll need to be evacuated."

"Kid," creaked Ratchet, "what the frag are you—"

Megatron slapped an override chip into his access port without even acknowledging him and he dropped back into unconsciousness. He patched the sparkchamber, reopened some of the patches Jazz had done and pulled out tubing from the kit, making sure the energon was routed correctly. Checked the fuel pump. It was all but slagged. "Jazz. Find someone around here who died with an intact fuel pump and bring it here."

Jazz, bless him, didn't blink. "You got it, Megs," he said, and after a few moments of swearing, brought a dripping still-mostly-warm fuel pump back. Megatron used one of the other energon cubes to rinse it fast—better than nothing—wiped it down, and hooked it up as best he could. It was a little big for Ratchet's frame. Then he covered the spark chamber with a thin foil layer, wrapped more foil around Ratchet's waist, and looked up. "All right. We can evacuate him now. He probably won't die in transport."

Jazz was staring at him. "You did that with the prosthetic hands."

Megatron looked down at them, then smiled crookedly. "Well, Ratchet does better work than Reflection Mining ever did."

He...he could do this. He could do this again. He felt a warmth come back into his spark, looked up at Jazz and laughed aloud. Then he reached out, grabbed Jazz's arm, and yanked him down to kiss him.

"You let me save him," he said softly, to Jazz's stunned expression. "You let me hold onto him. Even though Optimus—"

"Yeah," said Jazz. "Yeah. Optimus ain't worth it, mech." And he leaned up and kissed Megatron back, sweet and lingering and nothing like Tarn, whose innermost energon was still drying all up Megatron's arms and chest.

Prowl looked down at Optimus. "Don't think you're getting out of this," he said, and leveled his own blaster.

Starscream dropped out of the sky in front of him, landing hard enough to dent the ground. He leveled a nullray at Prowl. "No, you don't," he said. "You keep the violent fraghead," he jerked his head at Deadlock's crumpled frame, "and yourself in one piece, and I keep him."

Prowl knew his odds against Starscream. It *burned* to have Optimus so close, the last chance to stop the Decepticon advance so close, it burned to know that if they hadn't stopped Megatron Optimus would be dead *now*, but there was nothing to do about it now. He nodded.

Starscream gathered Optimus up, powered up his engines again. "Decepticons, RETREAT!"

Chapter 101

The transport was very quiet. Megatron was still sitting next to Ratchet, still hooked up to him and donating energon. Jazz was making sure he stayed fueled enough for both of them, which was a harder task than it sounded because Ratchet was still leaking a little.

"He's unconscious, correct?" said Prowl.

"Deeply," said Megatron from where he sat on the floor next to Ratchet. He vented out a sigh. "He's..." He trailed off. "We could have killed Optimus."

"Yes," said Prowl. "I doubt we'll get another opportunity. We've had a high-profile defection, yes, and we've gotten a foothold in Decepticon territory. We'll strip the resources we can, but we'll probably have to retreat after that; supply lines will be a problem to maintain, with our current mechpower."

"And if we'd killed Optimus?"

"It would have been more likely than not that the Decepticons would have factionalized and then collapsed."

"In short, we've bought time for the Ark project, but little else," said Megatron, and then stared down at Ratchet. His mouth tightened. "You... you let me save him. And the price was Cybertron itself."

"Yes," said Jazz.

"I shouldn't have," said Megatron, and for once he actually sounded guilty. "I shouldn't have put a single mech's life over the cause. It was—it was the wrong thing to do."

Jazz and Prowl exchanged a look.

"And the Matrix is angry with me for it," Megatron said. He raised his free hand, pressing it over his chest. "But I can't regret it." He sounded a little appalled by his own words.

"Neither can we," said Prowl. "Megatron, what are we fighting *for*?"

"Is it a better Cybertron, or just to stop the Decepticons?" asked Jazz. "We might lose Cybertron because of this, but we didn't lose *you*. We didn't make you lose who you are. That's important."

Megatron looked up at them, shocked. "What matters is protecting the Autobots, the innocents, from what Optimus will *do*," he protested. "I'm a tool to that end. You *know* that. I'm not special because I'm *Prime*. That's just falling back into Functionist—"

Jazz leaned forward and put a finger on his lips. The metal mesh was surprisingly warm and yielding—there was something that always made him expect everything about Megatron to be hard edges. Prowl looked at them with raised optic ridges.

"Shut up," Jazz said fondly. "You're talking like you're disposable. You're no more disposable than any other Autobot. You're not our leader because you're *Prime*. You're leading us because we all admire what's in here." He pointed at Megatron's chestplates, not wanting to touch. He'd fought Tarn today, after all. "*Not* the fragging Matrix, *you*. And keeping that intact, preserving what's important about you? That's vital. Otherwise this'll stop being a war about protecting people and

just be a war about killing the other side. We can't go there."

Megatron glanced down at Ratchet's face, which still looked completely horrible. "We can't tell him."

"No slag," said Jazz. "Ratchet has enough of a guilt complex without knowing that we might be giving up *Cybertron* to keep him online. Can you imagine the overtime Rung would have to pull?"

Megatron vented in, then looked up at them both. "Terminus always wanted me to become a symbol, not a person. To *step forward*, no matter the cost, to be a figurehead and sacrifice all at once. He...he called me weaksparked. Selfish."

"Yeah, he would," said Jazz. "That's not what we want out of you, mech. Also, if you don't mind me saying so, it's pretty gross he wanted you to treat yourself like something nonsentient and with limited autonomy *while fragging you*."

Megatron snorted at that. "Well, he's dead." He looked down at his right arm, heaved another long heavy vent.

"Yes," Prowl said. "He's dead. Which does not mitigate the damage he did to you, nor the fact we were privy to it; we saw both the medical reports, and pulled the footage from the derelict hotel for analysis. We'd hoped to find a way to counteract Tarn's voice, and it was the only recording of it in action we were—or have been—able to collect."

Megatron looked startled, then faintly sick.

They should have told him earlier, Jazz thought, miserably. Much, much earlier. But they hadn't wanted to do it while he was still barely holding himself together, and they hadn't wanted to distract him from planning the new offensive.

"How far was it disseminated?" asked Megatron.

"The raw footage was only the two of us," said Prowl. "Audio only went to the scientists, and your voice was edited out. Both are stored securely and require high-level security clearance and personal authorization from you, or myself, Jazz, and Ratchet in your absence. But it exists, and I apologize for not informing you."

"You should have informed me," said Megatron quietly. His hand closed more tightly around Ratchet's own, and he bent his head. "I cannot blame you for wanting to find a way to neutralize Tarn's voice. But you should have informed me."

"It was a serious error," said Prowl. "We will not repeat it. It might, however, erode your trust in us, and that is entirely reasonable."

Jazz thought of Megatron's mouth on his, hot and fierce, and hunched his shoulders unhappily. He felt Megatron's optics on him.

"You didn't call me a fool for it," said Megatron.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't call me a fool for what I gave him. Nor have you treated me any differently because of that." His mouth twisted wryly. "There are many mecha who would not have done as much. Jazz. You saw what Soundwave did to me as well."

"I did," said Jazz. "That ain't right either."

"It happened." Megatron looked from one to the other of them. "Tarn is dead. I want that footage destroyed. The audio—have they finished with it?"

"Inconclusive," said Prowl. "But as you've stated, Tarn is dead. We do not need it."

"I'd be a poor leader if I insisted that be repressed to save my dignity." Megatron sounded like he was forcing himself to sound sure. "They may build a weapon based on it. If that can save Autobot lives, I should not protest it."

"Shouldn't," said Jazz. "But you want to."

Megatron's shoulders slumped. "I want to," he admitted.

"You need some time, mech?"

Megatron was silent, still looking at his arm. "No," he said. "I *meant* that kiss, Jazz. Even after recent revelations."

Prowl looked at Jazz sharply, then at Megatron, his doorwings jerking up. He looked suddenly hopeful. "So I suppose we're revisiting that earlier conversation?"

"If you're still interested." Megatron searched both their faces.

"Then I would very much like a kiss as well," Prowl said, and Megatron smiled.

Prowl slipped down off the bench and went to him, moving slowly and deliberately. Jazz could hear Megatron's systems tick up even over the rattle of the transport. Prowl stopped in front of him; sitting, Megatron came most of the way up his chestplates.

Carefully watching his face, Prowl reached out and placed his forefingers feather-light under Megatron's chin, tipping his face up. Even though he was exerting only the slightest of pressure, Megatron went with him, optics shuttering and lips parting. Prowl's smile turned a little smug, and he leaned down to kiss Megatron's offered mouth.

Jazz squirmed his legs together, then crossed them. It hadn't really occurred to him how hot it would be just to watch the two of them, since he'd mostly been concentrating on the idea of *actively participating*. But *Primus*, watching Megatron happily lean into Prowl's control was fragging hot, all that incredible power willingly surrendering itself into other hands like it was a relief. The *trust*.

They were still kissing. Jazz wanted a do-over. Jazz really wanted a do-over. With both of them. He could hear Megatron's fans going, just from the kiss alone. He cleared his intake. "Mechs," he said. "Mechs, we uh, probably wanna wait until Megatron's not running half of Ratchet's systems to uh, go any further with that."

The two of them sprang apart, acutely embarrassed and flushing pink with it. Jazz cackled, delighted he'd gotten both of them at the same time. "We'll have plenty of time once we get back to base. Take him out for some nice energon, bring him crystals, little love notes on his desk... you know, do it properly?"

Prowl rolled his optics, still blushing furiously. "Like you're usually the voice of propriety around here."

"Do I look like an Iaconian consort?" Megatron protested.

Jazz chuckled. "Fine. Pace doesn't need to be glacial. Got it. Though the cleanup from this fight is gonna be some trouble. Ugh. Why do battles have to be so much trouble *after* they're done?"

The Matrix was still seething at him, reminding him of what he'd done, of how he'd *failed* his people with his selfishness. It kept shoving the image of Optimus on his knees before his optics, reproaching him. Reminding him of all the mecha who were going to die, all the lives he'd traded for Ratchet's, and though the guilt roiled in his spark, he refused to actually regret it.

Ratchet was alive. The spark of joy and relief he took from that helped push back the disappointment from the Matrix. It wasn't always right. And he was his own person.

Prowl and Jazz had *let* him be his own person. Megatron hadn't realized how thoroughly he'd been oppressed by the feeling he was needed in service to something bigger, that he had to monitor his every action against that metric, that he wasn't allowed to be anything but, and now with Jazz and Prowl supporting him he felt—free, that was the only word for it.

He could push the Matrix's demands back, and not feel derelict in his duties. He wasn't fighting for the Matrix's Cybertron. He was fighting for a Cybertron for all of them.

He, Jazz, and Prowl were completely covered in energon and muck. Minimus Ambus took one horrified look and sent them to the washracks, muttering about what had already been tracked into the command center.

This was... a mixed blessing. Technically, they should have all been working the moment they landed, because with Ratchet unconscious and First Aid still supervising the transportation of patients from the field hospital, there was a serious shortage of experienced medical personnel who could *read Ratchet's handwriting*. So Megatron was delegating cleanup to Jazz and Prowl, and headed down to the military hospital to help supervise admitting the casualties and also because he probably couldn't bear to let Ratchet out of his sight. Or Deadlock, either, but for different reasons; they already had most of the Wreckers guarding him, a military unit that Prowl muttered he was pretty sure were going to come back to bite him in the aft. Anything that included both Whirl and Impactor was liable to come back to bite you in the aft. Even just Whirl. Worse still, the Wreckers were apparently pretty impressed with Deadlock's heroics.

Washracks came first, though. Megatron's relief at getting clean—and wasn't that strange, he'd worked long periods of time a frag of a lot messier than this and it hadn't bothered him—quickly gave way to distraction, because Jazz and Prowl were *right there* and watching him with intense interest. The solvent sheeting down their frames, adding an extra gloss to their armor, didn't help anything.

Maybe it wasn't the best time to be starting something like this, not as he washed the life fluids of the last mech he'd loved out of his seams, but right now he desperately didn't want to even think about Terminus or Tarn, about the whole length of the relationship or the things he should have taken as warnings. He didn't want to think about what Terminus had planned for him, his whole function. He didn't want to think about whether he'd start grieving a mech whom he'd spent more time grieving than loving.

He could still feel the light touch of Prowl's fingers under his chin, a promise of what things would be like. Between today and everything that had happened since the split with the Decepticons, Jazz and Prowl had already seen him in ways far more intimate than mere interface, and they'd yet to betray his trust. He *was* deeply unhappy about the security footage, sickened that it existed at all,

that the incident had *happened*, but he couldn't deny that Prowl and Jazz had done their duty at the time. It was exactly what they should have done, with no give in it when it came to him, and that meant he could trust them not to act like fools because the three of them were fragging. They had said nothing to anyone they shouldn't have, and they'd tried to use it to hurt the person who'd inflicted it on him. It was what he would have told them to do had he been there to consult with them. They should have told him about it. They had accepted the error. They had promised not to repeat it. And he actually believed, deeply, they would keep that promise, and that certainty made him confident that he was making the right choice in continuing to trust them.

He—he might even be able to trust them with the submission he desperately wanted, that rest from responsibilities, from decisions. They'd been silent about what they'd seen. They would be silent about what the three of them might do. And if Prowl's preferences lay in domination, as Megatron guessed they did from that kiss, Megatron had never seen him treat Jazz in any way that implied he thought anything less of Jazz's submission, nor expected that from him outside the berth.

Megatron *wanted* that. And if it was a mistake—if it was a mistake, he could hardly contemplate it. He'd just put Ratchet's life above everything else, and every other decision seemed simple in comparison.

Prowl's gaze swept over him, cool and evaluating. Megatron shivered, as sensitive as if he already had his panels open.

"You've still got energon in your back plating," said Prowl. "Do you require assistance?"

"Prowler," said Jazz, the voice of a mech desperately attempting to be the voice of reason and hating every second of it, "that's the oldest one in the book and *we've got work to do*."

"He does in fact still have energon in his back plating," said Prowl, "and with the treads, he cannot possibly reach it. It will be more efficient, not to mention more likely to conserve solvent, if we assist him."

"Yes," said Megatron, resetting his vocalizer, "yes, that would be more efficient." Prowl was a lot shorter than he was. They both were. It would be easier for them to reach if he knelt. That was why he dropped to his knees, and the thrill that ran up his backstrut at the vulnerability was just a side effect.

He shivered at Prowl's hands on his back, stroking, at the feeling of the rough brush working its way in between his treads. The discomfort of the grit lodged there eased. Jazz and Prowl were gentle, competent as they worked their way efficiently from the top of his treads down. After a long time that left him trembling, a hand braced on the washracks wall to keep from just sliding to the floor in an exhausted, content heap, Prowl tapped the top of his right tread. "Can you transform these aside?"

Megatron nodded sleepily and did, exposing his vulnerable back. He heard Prowl's ventilations quicken, and quicken further when he jolted a little under the first gentle touch to his back.

"Is that all right?" Prowl asked. Megatron nodded again, spreading the treads further out of the way, and fingers teased down the length of his back, replaced quickly by a soft cloth smelling of cleanser.

It felt so good. Megatron tipped his head back and for a moment pretended they were actually done with their work, that he could go off to the oil baths with them afterward and soak and maybe also do some things that would require the thorough cleaning of the baths afterward. He wanted their hands on him, he wanted to go completely limp and compliant on them and have it be all right. He

imagined Prowl pressing up from behind him, sliding into him as he knelt obediently with his valve uncovered, and just managed to stop himself from sliding his knees a little more open.

"Primus," said Jazz, a little rough, as fingers hooked into Megatron's side vents, "you're gorgeous, Megs. There's so many things I wanna do with you. So many things I wanna watch Prowl do to you, too. Pretty sure you're into that, mech, but don't wanna assume."

"That sounds good," Megatron managed. He pushed himself up a little to look over his shoulder at them. "Anything we could get away with before Minimus calls us back?"

"Yeah I think we could—"

All three of their comms went off at once. They shared an annoyed look.

"Duty calls," Prowl said dryly, removing his fingers from where they'd been doing absolutely wicked things to Megatron's back plating. Megatron folded his treads back into place with a heavy sigh and climbed to his feet.

"Right," he said. "I'll see you this evening for fuel? When things have settled."

Things didn't settle, and none of their fuel breaks coincided, for another solid week.

Chapter 102

Drift felt like slag.

He forced his optics online—lying still while feeling like slag was never a good idea, not when you wanted to live—and found himself looking up at a ceiling that was an improbably cheery shade of orange. He glared at it while he waited for the rest of his systems to finish rebooting, and then managed, "What the *frag*?!"

A face loomed into his field of vision, disrupting the orange. Drift pressed his helm back against the slab. He *knew* Impactor. He did not want Impactor or his harpoon anywhere near his face when he couldn't move.

"You feelin' all right, kiddo?" said Impactor, cheerily.

"What the frag," said Drift, trying to become one with the slab.

"Because me 'n the others are taking bets on these." Impactor's hand joined Impactor's face, dangling one of Pharma's hands. "Seriously, were you just planning to throw them at people? Do you cons—ex-cons, whatever—take *need a hand* so seriously?" He bounced the severed hand a little. Drift guessed he had to have been out for a while, because it didn't drip.

"They're Pharma's," he said. "Meant them for Megatron. Thought it'd be sort of poetic."

Impactor looked at the hand for a few seconds and then grinned with all his dentae. He hadn't sharpened them like most Decepticons did, but it didn't make it any less terrifying. "Damn, that's cold. You know what, kid? You're gonna fit in here."

Drift managed a sneer. "I thought Autobots were all goody-goody."

Impactor snorted. "Good don't mean *nice*, kid. And we all fragging hate Pharma." He stared at the hand a few seconds longer. "Thing is, Megs is doing just fine with the hands Ratchet built for him. You bought him the time to save Ratchet by being a suicidal idiot and throwing yourself in Optimus's face, you know that? We like that kind of thing. Anyway, he's pretty fragging pleased with 'em, took himself off the transplant list, which he could do because he found Ratchet's list of passwords written down and taped under the desk, and could actually *read the handwriting*. Ratch is probably pretty lucky to still be in a coma—Red Alert's still screaming about it and we had to do a major security overhaul because of it, so don't go getting any ideas." He tossed Pharma's hand up in the air and caught it. "Plenty of other folks on that list, though, who'd be glad of em. Including..." He paused, looking thoughtful, then glanced up. "Hey Whirl! NEED A HAND?"

"What the frag do you want," said the mech addressed as Whirl, turning around. He got the hand full in his single optic.

Impactor cackled. Drift found himself laughing, or trying to laugh, but it really hurt so he settled for smirking.

"Stop that," said Megatron, coming into view. "Impactor, if you want to roughhouse in my medical bay, you can help me give Sunstreaker his nanite supplements. He keeps spitting them out in the hazardous waste containers and thinking he's fooled me."

"Hey Megs, think fast!" said Whirl and threw the hand. Drift winced.

Megatron caught it out of the air and stared at it. "Why am I holding Pharma's severed hand?" he said, his intonation so exactly like Ratchet's it was *creepy*.

Whirl pointed to Impactor. Impactor pointed to Drift.

"I'm defecting," Drift announced to the room at large. "Also I chopped Pharma's hands off. You're welcome. And it's Drift now."

Megatron stared silently at the hand in his own. After a moment he looked up. "Looks like all of the metal damage can be regenerated," he said. "Give me the other one. We'll give them a day or so in CR and then use them. Whirl, go see First Aid. You might as well get your pre-op consultation done now. Impactor, I want to talk to Drift. Alone. Now, please."

"You sound so much like Ratchet," Drift told him, once Impactor and Whirl had backed off.

"He's alive because of you," Megatron told him. "So am I. Thank you."

Drift shrugged. "Yeah, well. Couldn't let Pharma get him."

Megatron just sat there, looking at him. He mustered up a glare. "I don't want to talk about it."

Megatron just nodded, gave him a small, proud smile that made Drift want to punch him. "Welcome to the Autobots, Drift."

"You mean welcome to the *Wreckers*," Impactor said, looming up behind Megatron. "Megatron, I'm *keeping* him."

"Clear it with Prowl first," said Megatron, getting back to his feet, but he was still smiling. "He'll want to know."

So. Tarn was dead. Pharma had no hands, which was probably only going to last until he got his hands on a POW list and found a medic on it and bullied Hook into doing the transplant. Optimus wasn't in a coma again, but Drift had done a pretty nasty job on the primary relay that controlled the whole left side of his frame, so he wasn't going to be doing any fighting or commanding anytime soon. And Drift had defected.

And they'd lost that battle.

But all Starscream's least favorite people were out of the way, which meant it was time to work on his pet projects.

He pulled up the file entitled *Phase Six*.

"Hey there," said Jazz, and Megatron turned to look at him. Jazz waved at him jauntily. "I'm here to debrief Drift," he explained. "Better to do that when he's still flat on his back and miserable. Mech's got a temper."

"He certainly does," said Megatron. "I've left First Aid in charge of his care—bribery seems to work."

Jazz sidled up to him. "So...can I get a kiss first? Been feeling the lack. I'll take it back to Prowl." He flicked half his visor on and off in a wink.

Given how things had been going, Megatron was pretty sure he wasn't going to have another chance this good to do anything with either Jazz or Prowl for the foreseeable future, so he stepped in close and cupped Jazz's face with the hand that wasn't holding a datapad full of patient records. Jazz's cheery smile went a little soft and fond at the corners, and through his visor, the faint outlines of his optics closed a little. Megatron smiled a little and bent to close his lips over Jazz's, soft and slow. Jazz's lips parted under his, exposing the tips of his sharpened dentae.

Jazz's hands came up to wrap around his shoulders, avoiding the back of his helm and neck. He pulled Megatron down to him, commanding in a way that had Megatron's fans suddenly sputtering on.

"Mmm," said Jazz, appreciative. His grip tightened, and he nipped at Megatron's intake. Megatron opened, going warm and weak in the knees as Jazz's glossa pushed in. It was hard not to imagine what Jazz's glossa might feel like *elsewhere*. He dropped his hands to Jazz's narrow waist and stroked at it with his thumbs. He was almost small enough that Megatron could get both hands *all* the way around his waist. He wasn't exactly experienced with mecha so much smaller than himself, but Jazz was all weapon, stripped down to the essentials and vicious competence, and that was really fragging hot too.

Jazz's hands slid down his back, pausing here and there to rub a finger in his seams, and it was all Megatron could do not to pop his panel right there. It'd been a week since the washracks, and he'd spent more time than he cared to admit thinking about Jazz and Prowl, when he wasn't so exhausted he just fell down to sleep on one of the spare cots, or, at one point, Ratchet's desk. Jazz had to know exactly what he was doing, because he slid his fingers along the vents on Megatron's abdomen with familiar deftness before flicking them over the top of his pelvic span and breaking the kiss.

"Yeah, okay," said Jazz, venting a little hard. "I actually do have to go debrief Drift or I'd be down to frag you over Ratchet's desk there, but I think Prowl would be torqued off he missed out. But Primus, mech, can you kiss."

Megatron reset his vocaliser, a little dazed. "Yes. I have—I have a surgery scheduled uh, soon," a check of his chronometer showed *soon* was in about twenty minutes, "so we'd better not."

"Right, so you go do that. And I'll uh, go do, I mean deal with, Drift. See ya at the command meeting tomorrow. Maybe we can get Prowl to end it a little early and put that conference table to good use. Seems like the only way the three of us can get a little alone time."

Prime of all Cybertron, and he was going to have to resort to sneaking and finding deserted places for assignations between tasks just as he had in the mines. "Do you think the full support of the Prime will carry any weight with him?"

"Nah," said Jazz. "But yours will. All right, it's a date, the three of us and the conference table."

"Any news?" said Optimus. He put down the datapad he'd been reading so he could concentrate on Starscream.

"Intelligence seems to indicate Ratchet survived," said Starscream, settling down next to him. "I thought you might like to know."

"I'm glad," said Optimus, and shook his helm sadly. "It was deeply foolish of Tarn to attack him. The fault did not lie with him, and now our hopes of recruiting him are virtually nonexistent."

"Very true," said Starscream. "Pharma is recovering, though he remains badly damaged and finding suitable replacement hands will be difficult."

Optimus sighed heavily. "I am sorry that Deadlock has let us down in such a way," he said. "I had believed he was a good mech."

Starscream eyed him narrowly. He knew quite well that Pharma was not a good mech, and that Deadlock's defection had been for good reason. They were well rid of Deadlock, but Optimus had to be stopped from making the same mistake with someone who actually mattered. "I examined some of the allegations," he said slowly. "I... believe some of the more unpleasant ones may be credible. I don't think we should dismiss Pharma from his position, as he's a brilliant medic and deserves better than to have his career ruined by rumors, but I do think we shouldn't be too quick to support his attempts to reunite with Ratchet. At the very least, the rumors are persistent enough we may see similar defections if we try to force the matter; Ratchet was fairly popular."

"It grieves me to hear you believe them," Optimus said, "but the second part of what you've said is even more true if even *you* have come to that conclusion."

"You know I am as reluctant as you to cast doubt upon our Decepticons," said Starscream, reaching to put his hand over Optimus's. "You remember I saved Pharma from Jazz. I don't say this lightly, and I say it deeply reluctantly. I hope you can trust my judgement, as unpleasant as the implications may be."

Optimus frowned. "I suppose I ought to, old friend. I just don't like believing these things without solid evidence."

"We'll give him the benefit of the doubt," Starscream reassured him. "But let's not let him get near Ratchet. Even if I'm wrong, the rumors alone..."

"I understand." Optimus turned his hand in Starscream's, fingers tickling Starscream's wrist joint. Starscream glanced down at it, surprised. When he looked up at Optimus again, the mech was smiling, still sad, but genuine.

Starscream's spark stuttered a little. Optimus was an *idiot* in all the important ways, but he hadn't just hated Megatron for seducing him because Megatron was a complication. Optimus should have been his.

"You have a plan, don't you," Optimus said. "I want to hear it."

But he'd won, hadn't he. Optimus *was* his. Starscream settled back and pulled out his datapad. "It's... a side project, but I think the psychological impact on our enemies will make it worthwhile," he said. "An expansion of our war to the rest of the universe is likely inevitable. We may have to deal with hostile species. We need mecha—supersoldiers, if you will—who can fight that war singlehanded. And I have some ideas of who those mecha should be." He handed the datapad over, pulled out the next. "Tarn's death has left a significant gap in our internal disciplinary systems. I'd like to propose a solution—we make Tarn essentially immortal. We rebuild another mech as his replacement. Think about the psychological impact on Megatron as well as the rest of the Autobots."

Optimus's optics went very wide. "Can we find a mech willing to do that?" he asked. "It's... that type of reframing is a profound undertaking."

Starscream smirked and sent a ping. "We already have a volunteer," he said, as the door opened. "Lord Optimus, I'd like to introduce you to Glitch. He's *very* upset about Deadlock's

treachery."

Chapter 103

"I'm bored!" Drift declared.

Megatron stared down at him, deeply unimpressed. "The neural circuitry in the bottom half of your frame is still reintegrating," he said. "I don't care how bored you are, you're not getting off this berth."

"I can still throw things," Drift muttered, folding his arms.

Megatron glanced at the other side of the room and the wreckage of everything that had been on the berthside table. "I can see that. Were you aiming at anything in particular?"

"...no."

Megatron made a note on his datapad.

"Shouldn't you be doing Primely things, not hanging around here and pretending you're still a doctor?" asked Drift. Megatron looked sharply up at him. Drift refused to feel bad for him. "We're in a hospital, there's like a hundred people more qualified than you."

"I am assured this is where I can do the most good," Megatron said, clearly refusing to rise to the bait. "I'm also scheduling you for some sessions with Rung, which you may put down to my naturally vindictive nature. And I'll also ask you to kindly cease throwing things, as we'll be decanting Ratchet in a few minutes and putting him on the slab next to you once he's fully online. If you disturb him, you will learn just how vindictive I can be."

Drift sneered at him. "Like you'd get away with it without your Autobots squealing about abuse of authority."

Megatron looked evenly over the edge of his datapad. "I'll put you next to Whirl. He hasn't stopped singing '99 Cubes of Engex on the Wall' since he came out from under sedation. Ratchet, on the other hand, is far more likely to complain when he wakes up, and I assume you'll find that more pleasant by far."

Drift glanced at the berth next to his. He'd get to see Ratchet again.

He settled back. "Fine. But the next datapad you give me had better have something *actually* entertaining on it."

Megatron's mouth quirked, and he was about to respond when First Aid called from across the room, "Megatron, I'll need your help to transfer him," and he turned and left. Drift watched him go.

It wasn't lost on him how at home Megatron was here. It was a good thing Pharma had failed to destroy his ability to be a medic entirely. It was even better that he wasn't going to give that up, but he was fooling himself here. Primes were warriors. Sooner or later, Megatron would be out on the field again, where he belonged.

Him hanging around here, deluding himself that he could be a medic, made sense. But he was going to be disappointed.

Drift... kind of felt bad for him, actually. He didn't really think much of the mech; after all,

he was an Autobot, weak and sentimental, willing to tell himself he could be a medic when the world needed him to be something else, willing to give up the chance to kill Optimus to save Ratchet. But having Ratchet alive—that was good, because Drift wasn't sure he wanted to live in a world where someone like Ratchet would just be allowed to die, especially at the hands of someone like Tarn.

He watched Megatron vanish around the corner to the CR tanks and sighed. At least he wasn't making excuses for people like Optimus had. At least he gave a frag about his people and their safety.

Drift had been disappointed enough, but maybe, he could give Megatron a chance.

"You got him?" asked First Aid, as Megatron took Ratchet's full weight with a slight grunt. Medics were *dense*.

"Yes," he said aloud. He still significantly outmassed Ratchet, even with Ratchet's heavy frame. He carefully transferred him onto the gurney, then checked him over with First Aid. Most of his plating had healed, and his scanner showed him the fuel pump, fuel tank, and sparkchamber were all integrating the new metals well.

"You did a Pit of a field surgery on him," First Aid said. "I know I've said that before. We should write it up as a paper, actually. Though we'll probably have to recommend something other than sticking your hand in an energon fire to snuff it out."

"I'm not a medic," said Megatron, applying a dressing to the part of Ratchet's chest that hadn't sealed all the way back up. He attached the fluids drip with deft hands, checking the life support attachment points as he did. No corrosion. That was good. He sprayed them with a disinfectant. "I don't think most mecha could run someone off their systems that long."

"All the more reason we should have more medics like you. Miners and heavy frames. Mecha who could integrate life support systems into their own frames—we could cut field mortality rates *incredibly*, Megatron. I've actually sent Prowl a proposal already, asking for aggressive recruitment of frames traditionally underrepresented in the medical profession. I should have earlier but..." He shrugged. "You saving Ratchet made an argument most politicians can't refute. We need to use that."

Megatron stared at him across Ratchet's frame. First Aid's optics narrowed in a smile. "I know," he said. "They made you a medic in the first place to keep anyone else from being able to be one like you. This was the best revenge I could think of."

"Thank you," Megatron said. It was almost too much to really absorb; what he'd done on the field, frantic and grieving, had not just saved Ratchet's life. It had opened the door for all the mecha like him in a way the most conservative voices in the Autobot council couldn't argue. And it had left it open.

He thought about the suspicious chisel marks behind the mech in that stone frieze outside the Iaconian Medical Academy. It wasn't too far from here. "First Aid... do you think I have much of a say in municipal décor? At least once we have fewer pressing concerns."

First Aid looked at him, surprised, and then tilted his helm as he realized. "That old bas-relief outside of the Academy? Yeah. Yeah I think you do. But we gotta get that paper out first. Let's meet up tomorrow morning and start getting it drafted."

They rolled Ratchet into the recovery room. "Just like old times," Megatron said, amused.

"Way *better* than old times," First Aid said firmly. "Now come on, let's do this transfer by the book. Can you imagine the fit he'd pitch if he woke up and we were doing it wrong? He'd flunk the pair of us right back into our first year."

He said it fondly, looking down at Ratchet's still face, and Megatron found himself smiling. "I'm looking forward to scaring the new students with tales of Ratchet the Hatchet," he said.

"Given the way he is, you'll probably end up teaching some of those students. He'll say it's good for your career development." First Aid chuckled. "I think it's code for things he really doesn't want to do."

"Hm. He did always say that about washing the glassware," said Megatron. They moved Ratchet over, and it was time for the command meeting, but Megatron found himself hesitating a moment before leaving, looking at Ratchet there.

"Keep an optic on him," he said to First Aid. "I don't care what's happening, I want to know the moment he starts onlining."

"Of course," said First Aid. "Now go on, don't keep everyone waiting."

The meeting was fairly pointless, not because the material was unimportant, but because the people informing and being informed about it were all so obviously deeply distracted. If they were lucky, Megatron mused, it wouldn't be clear *why* they were all so deeply distracted. But they hadn't bothered to be too opaque about their courting—in the rare and fleeting moments they encountered each other—and he hadn't appointed anyone to command because they were unobservant. They'd probably noticed the choke of quickly halted fans any time Jazz or Prowl came into close quarters with him, or vice versa.

As it was, everyone was relieved when Prowl called the meeting to an end, and there was a general giggling scramble for the exit and more than a few winks. Jazz grinned back. Prowl let out a long, slow sigh and leaned gently forward to rest his forehead on the table.

"I turned off the cameras," Jazz announced.

"Thank you, Jazz," said Prowl. "I believe we should all prepare for a certain amount of good natured teasing, this evening."

"Yep," said Jazz. "Okay, we've got half an hour. Let's make the most of it."

"How sturdy is this table?" Megatron asked, leaning on it and seeing if he could make it wiggle.

"I...didn't exactly pick it for its structural soundness," said Prowl, "as I hadn't anticipated this use for it, but I think it should be sufficient. Megatron, as you are the newest participant here, I should ask what you prefer."

It was strange hearing Prowl talk so...clinically, when Megatron could very well hear the whirr of his fans. Jazz had just leaned forward with his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands, staring at Megatron with a smitten expression.

Megatron tried to say something, but his first attempt was mostly static, which was stupid because he was a medic and knew better than to be so shy about this slag, even if he hadn't felt his

interface protocols running so hard since Impactor, in the mines when he'd still been a young fool who'd believed he could change the world with a few well-placed arguments and poetry, and Jazz said, "Would you like us to throw you across the table and take turns playing with your valve?"

His fans were a *lot* louder than Prowl or Jazz's, and there was no hiding the sound of them as they roared to life. "Yes," he said. "I do like using my valve."

Prowl got up from the other end of the table, all predatory grace, and started toward him. "I do not wish to presume, but your earlier reactions have left both of us with the distinct impression that you enjoy taking a submissive role. Is this correct?"

Megatron rose to put his back to the conference table and Jazz, with a half-thought of pushing himself up to sit on it. He reset his vocalizer on a blat of static, watching Prowl come nearer, every inch of his plating prickling with anticipation.

"We'd be really into that," said Jazz, his plating scraping gently as he climbed up on the table behind Megatron. He probably could have done it silently, but Megatron appreciated the warning. "We'd also be really into it if you prefer to run the show. Or just have plain old fragging without the trimmings. We're not real picky, when it comes to you."

Megatron made a decision, pushing himself up onto the table and closer to Jazz, who slid forward to bracket Megatron's waist with his knees. Megatron spread his legs a little, so Prowl could step in between them.

Optimus had turned his submission against him. Tarn had tortured him for the crime of trusting him.

Prowl and Jazz had been there to catch him, every time, and they'd never asked anything in return. They'd even given him their own trust. Trust, unflinching advice without a trace of the pandering Optimus had demanded. They'd been insulted and enraged on his behalf, willing to tear the planet apart to do the right thing.

Megatron *could* trust them.

He was terrified to say it out loud. He'd trusted Terminus, he'd trusted Tarn. So he didn't say it. Instead, he said, "Yes. I enjoy submitting."

Prowl stepped in tight between his legs, bringing their pelvic plating together. He placed careful hands on Megatron's thighs. With the conference table, he still had to look up to see into Megatron's face.

Megatron bent to kiss him. Prowl pushed himself up using Megatron's thighs, meeting him partway with a demanding kiss. Jazz nuzzled against his back, his hips pressing into Megatron's aft. Megatron reached back behind himself and found Jazz's waist, pulling the smaller bot flush with him. Jazz gasped a little and then said, "You know, I would *love* to get those talented fingers of yours in my valve. I'm pretty sure if you can do surgery with those claws, you're not gonna hurt me, even if we all get too excited."

Megatron groaned and reluctantly broke the kiss with Prowl—Prowl had been plundering his mouth delightfully—to say, "No, we're still using the claw-caps for that. I have some in my subspace."

"Good," said Prowl. "Come back here," and pulled him right back down to kiss him some more, his hands exploring every rivet of Megatron's thighs in a delightfully thorough way.

Megatron whined a little as the flats of Prowl's palms worked their way down to the insides of his thighs and up to his interface panel.

Jazz was ghosting appreciative fingers over his aft. Megatron leaned into both of them, his vents coming in rough sharp pants. He probably needed to open his panels soon, because they were tight on time, but he was also really enjoying the attention, the way the two of them seemed enchanted with *him*, not just the fragging. He tilted his hips into Prowl's hand, biting his lip with a muffled noise.

Something beeped, loud and insistent. Megatron's optics snapped open. His comm. Prowl stepped smartly back; Jazz's hands went to his waist, no longer tormenting but reassuring. "Medbay," said Prowl, who could see the thing's screen. "You'd better pick up."

It was like a bucket of icy solvent. Megatron did. "What is it?"

"Ratchet's onlining," said First Aid. *"You should probably be down here when he does."*

"On my way," said Megatron, hung up, and then looked at Prowl and Jazz. "I apologize—"

"No need," said Prowl. "Ratchet is important."

Jazz sighed a little and disengaged. "You know what, I'm talking to Minimus. I don't care who knows we're fragging, or at least *trying* to frag, I'm getting all three of our schedules cleared tomorrow night, evening fuel onward. That sound good to everyone?"

Megatron and Prowl looked at each other. Prowl's smile turned a little sly.

"That sounds good. See to it," said Megatron, and slid down off the table, heading for the medbay.

"When Ratchet's doing well enough he can be shouted at, I'm shouting at him about his timing," said Jazz's voice behind him. *"Dammit."*

Chapter 104

Ratchet was beginning to online, the faint uptick in processor function and processes from the basal levels of a mech in a coma, but Megatron got there well before he was anywhere near conscious. He sat down next to Ratchet and took his hand and waited, much as Ratchet had for him, again and again and again.

Ratchet's systems hummed softly, scaling up, and his fingers twitched as his processor started testing the connections. Megatron waited. Ratchet's vents grew louder, and Megatron listened carefully to make sure there was no rattle of an obstruction.

Ratchet's optics slowly flickered open, their glow brightening. He squinted at the ceiling, then groaned a little, mostly static, closing them.

"That's..." he managed after a while, optic ridges furrowing. "That's a *lot* of error messages." Pause. "And who jumped up and down on my fuel tank?"

"Tarn," said Megatron.

"...I don't think this is the same fuel pump I passed out with," said Ratchet, after another long pause.

"I think you should turn your diagnostics off and stop shocking yourself with your repairs," said Megatron.

"...*who ran my systems off theirs for SIX FRAGGING HOURS?*"

Megatron heaved a long vent. "You know, I don't think I was ever this critical of your work when you'd saved *my* life."

Ratchet turned his helm to look at Megatron. "Kid," he started, coughed. Megatron grabbed for the handheld scanner next to him immediately, but all Ratchet spat out was a little wad of the CR tank fluid. "Kid, what the frag happened?"

"Tarn tried to kill you," said Megatron. "I stopped him." He took a long, deliberately steady vent. "I killed him."

Ratchet stared up at him and then his hand tightened on Megatron's hand. "Are you..."

"I'm all right," Megatron said. He vented deeply. He didn't feel badly about it, that was true. He didn't feel anything, and after as much time as he'd spent with Rung, he didn't trust that. But he wasn't putting that on Ratchet.

"Yeah, right," said Ratchet. "So what happened after you fought Tarn off?"

"Prowl and Jazz," said Megatron. "They stopped me from fighting Optimus. I thought you were dead, so..." He looked away, unable to meet Ratchet's optics. He couldn't tell Ratchet that he might have ended the war that way. "I wanted revenge."

Ratchet's fingers tightened under his. "And you saved me instead."

Megatron bowed his helm.

Ratchet lifted his other arm, wincing, to put it over Megatron's hand. "I'm so proud of you,"

he whispered.

"For what?" asked Megatron, his spark twisting. Had Ratchet realized how close he'd been to *leaving* him? If he'd given the Matrix its way, Ratchet would be *dead*. The thought hurt, a lot.

Ratchet's glare settled on his chestplates. "Is that stupid thing giving you trouble for it?" he demanded. Megatron ducked his head. Ratchet snorted.

"Kid, the reason I'm fragging proud of you isn't the skill of the surgery, though doing it with new hands of any sort is incredible, but you—you chose to heal, not destroy."

Megatron stared at him, wanted to point out all the ways killing Optimus would have saved more lives. But Ratchet's gaze caught and held him.

"You wanted to be a medic, Megatron," Ratchet said, and closed his hands tight around Megatron's, careful of the claws. "And despite everything, you *acted* like one. Even if it was just to save my decrepit aft."

The Matrix hummed a discordant, disagreeing note against Megatron's spark. *Your personal virtue isn't worth Cybertronian lives*. He pushed it aside.

"And it was an incredible surgery." Ratchet's optics closed, face creasing briefly in pain. Megatron reached for the pain chips next to him, but Ratchet weakly waved him off. "I didn't think I'd be waking up again. I know what he did to me."

Ratchet sighed heavily. "I was such an idiot. I was angry. I wanted to stop him. I wanted him to have more to deal with than just you. I wasn't going to leave my patient. And it wasn't a fight at all. At least I managed to lead him away before he caught up."

Megatron thought, briefly, about what he'd seen, Tarn's claws coming through Ratchet's frame from behind. Ratchet had been running from him. Rage flashed through him again, brief and white-hot. "You did the right thing," he said. "Even if it turned out badly, it was right."

Ratchet chuckled a little, pained. Then, "You were fighting Optimus. Did that slagger actually leave you alone when you went to rescue me?"

"No," Megatron said. "Drift defected. He stopped him."

"Drift!" Ratchet stared at him. "Why the frag—"

"Optimus ordered him to kidnap you," Megatron said.

Ratchet looked blank. "Why would they want me? They have Pharma."

"Pharma wanted you," said Megatron. "Optimus... supported him. Again."

Ratchet turned his head away, closing his optics. "I'm never going to get away from him."

"Well, Drift cut his hands off," said Megatron. "And stapled him to the battlefield with a knife, from what I understand. He survived, but I think he may have been significantly discouraged. And I'm getting you bodyguards."

"Am I going to regret asking what happened to Pharma's hands?" Ratchet asked, trying to sound flippant. He failed miserably.

"Used them for the next person on the transplant list," said Megatron.

"Pharma's hands," said Ratchet, "and you're still using those things?!"

Megatron gave him a small crooked smile. "I saved your life with them," he said. "I think they're good enough for my purposes."

"I made those out of spare parts," said Ratchet. "They're not anywhere near good enough for medical work!"

"They're certainly better than the hands I was constructed with. I've actually been working on the parts for others; I thought it might be a good thing to do while you recovered."

Ratchet settled back on the berth, eyeing him narrowly. "And you ran my systems off of yours for six hours. I thought I warned you about energon transfers before you rescued Jazz. And after."

Megatron smiled a little. "Mining isn't a gentle job, Ratchet, and the Matrix reinforced me further. You know that some frames like mine are supposed to be able to hold up the ceiling in a cave-in so valuable equipment can be extracted? Functioning as someone's external life-support is difficult, but it's not life-*threatening*."

"Primus," said Ratchet.

"First Aid is pushing for more heavy-labor frametypes to be recruited to the medical corps for just that reason," said Megatron. "We did it, Ratchet. We opened the door for other mecha like me. I know Trepan had meant to do the opposite, to bar people like me from ever becoming medics because of my failure. We managed to do the opposite."

"You," said Ratchet. "*You* did the opposite. That's on you, kid, not me."

"We," said Megatron, finding himself smiling again. "You trained me, Ratchet, and you built these hands, and most importantly, you fought for me. You took me on in the first place—do you think I would have survived with Lathe mentoring me? He thought I was just lazy and stupid! And then you fought for me. You put your career at risk again and again to defy the hospital board, the Functionist Council, everyone, to help me become a medic. They tried to kick me out. You stopped them." He'd felt so dreadfully helpless at the time, staring up at all the august faces, all twisted with disdain. Trepan fidgeting with his needles. "I hope you'll help train them. I expect it will be easier than training me, since they won't be shadowplayed the same way."

Ratchet snorted. "Yeah, I suppose I could do that. Bring them in here and I'll shout lectures at them from my medical berth."

"I'll notify Prowl not to start recruiting anyone until I think you're medically ready to shout," said Megatron.

"*I'll* tell you when I'm medically ready to shout," said Ratchet.

Megatron raised his optic ridges at him. "Ratchet. *I've* been a good patient to *you*."

Ratchet sputtered, and only First Aid's rapid arrival saved Megatron from a verbal evisceration.

"Hello, Ratchet. How are you feeling?"

"Like I want my idiot students to stop using their Academy-approved 'bedside manner'," Ratchet made finger quotes, "on me. By all means, interrupt Megatron's impertinence with my

actual medical condition. I want to see my scans."

"Right here, Ratchet," said First Aid fondly, and handed them over. Ratchet snatched them out of his hands with far more energy than a mech an hour out of a CR tank should have managed and glared at them, thumbing through the report.

"Interesting," he said. "I find here that apparently this is my *third* fuel pump in as many weeks. Megatron, who taught you to pull random fuel pumps out of corpses during field surgery? They could have had *anything*."

"They had a fuel pump, you didn't," Megatron pointed out. "We exchanged it when we got you home and did a full systems flush as soon as we could."

Ratchet just shook his helm. After a while, he said, "Proud of both of you crazy kids."

Megatron looked up at First Aid, feeling as he had early in their friendship, flush with success and relief. It wouldn't last, he knew that, but that made treasuring it all the more important.

Okay, so Drift could deal with Ratchet napping next to him. He could even deal with Megatron falling asleep in the chair next to Ratchet, head leaned back against the wall and vents rattling gently. What he couldn't deal with was the hands.

"What the frag are you doing?" he demanded, after about an hour of queasy amazement, watching the two of them at work.

"Entertaining Ratchet on my fuel break," Megatron said without looking up.

"Being useful despite this tyrant's best efforts," said Ratchet. "No, wrong attachment type for the dorsal energon line, that will tear. Try this."

"They're severed hands!" said Drift.

"They're scratch-built hands," Ratchet corrected.

"Why are you making body parts," said Drift, hearing the exhaustion in his own voice.

"There are still plenty of other people who need hands," said Megatron. "The parts for them just came through. Besides, it's something Ratchet can do while staying the frag in berth. That's important."

Drift watched in horrified fascination. Sure, it probably wasn't like watching someone take somebody's hands apart, except it kind of was. That was the only way he'd ever seen all those bits—dangly and otherwise—before.

He turned over, putting his back to them. And to think he'd expected the Autobots to be delicate!

Jazz and Prowl came in after Megatron had left to help First Aid with something. Ratchet put down the hand he was working on and frowned at them. "I'm getting the feeling there's a lot going on in my own medbay I'm not privy to."

Drift for one, who was acting strangely polite for a former Decepticon. Though that might just have been the hands. Ratchet had finished three pairs by now. For a bloodthirsty fragger, Drift

seemed unusually unsettled by unclaimed body parts.

"How come Megatron's got the time to run the medbay?" he asked. "Aren't you lot usually hauling him off to save the world?"

"World-saving's been postponed," said Jazz, settling at the end of the berth. "We did good. Right now, it's all about licking our wounds and figuring out where we wanna hit the cons next. Megs needs to sign off on that, of course, but we bought ourselves a little venting room with that last victory. He managed to fix you, he can be a medic if he wants to, figured we should let him enjoy it. He's been through enough scrap."

"He had to kill Terminus," said Prowl more softly. "He's acting well enough, but he needs time. Right now, his input is valuable, but we can do the time-intensive things ourselves."

Ratchet watched them carefully. "There's still something you're not telling me. Something happened to him while I was unconscious. He's not acting the way he was. You aren't acting right, either."

They exchanged a look. "We... got an idea of what losing you would have done to him," said Jazz slowly. "It would have been like Praxus or Vos. And... we're not just fighting to stop the Decepticons. We're fighting for a new life. For everyone. For something worth living."

"And we want him whole at the other end of it," said Prowl. He glanced at Drift, who seemed deep in recharge. Ratchet didn't trust it, and neither did Prowl, who lowered his voice still more. "It would be so easy for him to slip into becoming a leader and nothing else, a mech who'd destroy his spark and conscience in order to buy a future for the rest of us. But that future would exact its cost long after he'd bought it, and his spark and conscience wouldn't be enough. We, and all our successors, would be burdened with the guilt of it. And we all want better for Megatron than to let him turn himself into a vicious weapon that would have to be put down like a mad turbofox at the moment of his victory."

"He pulled back from that precipice. He's going to have to do it again." Prowl let out a long vent. "We're all going to have to do it again. It's better that we lose the planet than we stumble off that, because at the end of the day, our survival is about living. We can make a new home, elsewhere in the universe. We can't remake our sins."

There was something between the lines, something Ratchet couldn't quite pick up on. He frowned at Prowl, wondering what he was hinting at.

"A life where we go down the road of simple brute revenge is one I hope to stave off a little longer," Prowl said. "We may yet come to it. But we didn't in that battle. Megatron was able to make taking revenge unnecessary by healing. That's the Prime we need." He put a hand on Ratchet's shoulder. "That's the Prime you raised."

Ratchet felt the optical lubricant rise in his optics before he could stop it. He snuffled, running a hand over his face. "A lot of that was him. So much of that was his."

"You made it possible for him, mech," said Jazz. "They sent him to the Academy to torture him, not to let him triumph. And you were there for him before any of us were. Give yourself a little credit."

"You saved me," said Drift, and all three of them looked over at him. He'd turned his head on the berth. "You saved me more than he did. Still fragged off about him leaving all of us but because of you I understood why." He looked away, mouth compressing. "You made me a better

person, I guess."

"So be gentle to yourself," said Jazz to Ratchet. "You matter a lot. Not for what you can do. For who you are. And your friends are here for you."

Ratchet snorted. He was old, and he was difficult, and he deserved none of this. But that didn't mean he didn't appreciate it. "You're just making nice to me because you still want to court him."

"Not really, no," said Jazz, "but if it makes the subject more emotionally approachable, keep on telling yourself that."

"Frag off, you're talking to Rung too much," said Ratchet, but smiled as he said it. "You don't need to impress me, kids. Megatron couldn't do better."

"Fortunate," said Prowl, "as the other reason we are here is to collect him for our activities this evening."

"By which he means date," said Jazz.

Ratchet sighed heavily. "You lot are exhausting. Go have fun." And then, because he couldn't help himself, "Are all your firewalls current?"

All three younger bots groaned variations on *Of course they are!* Ratchet grinned and started on the next hand.

Chapter 105

Megatron was finishing removing and sanding the welds from First Aid's work on one of the frontliners when Jazz and Prowl showed up with expectant expressions. He handed the work over to First Aid and washed up. Prowl and Jazz waited for him to finish that before they moved in, Jazz slinging an arm around his waist and tucking his helm into his armpit. "Hey there, handsome."

Megatron looked down at him with a raised optic ridge, which let Prowl come bump up against him from the other side, like an affectionate pneumapuma.

Jazz grinned unrepentantly up at him as they walked away, First Aid waving at them with entirely too smug an air. "We're here to take you to dinner and then seduce you?"

"Technically, the dinner is part of the seduction," said Prowl. "We do fully understand that you didn't want us trying to buy anything fancy, because of the shortages, but it turns out foamed energon puffs are fairly inexpensive to make at home. And fairly easy—at least we haven't blown anything up, yet."

"Mercury filled," Jazz offered. "No lead flakes; those are held up until we can start getting shipments from Polyhex—gotta roust that squadron of Decepticons first. We'll manage it. How'd you like to sit on the roof while we eat? Watch the city go by. The city lights, while we can—we're going to have to start ordering blackouts at night if we lose the anti-aircraft emplacements at Tyger Pax."

"Do you think we will?" Megatron allowed himself to be guided out of the medbay.

"It's probably a matter of time," said Prowl. "Phase 1 evacuation plans are ready for Tyger Pax's population, however. With Vos's spaceport still under repair, we're able to get people into orbit. Coordinated evacuation means that by the time the Decepticons do drive us offworld, we'll have consolidated bases across the space that was the old Cybertronian Empire. If the Decepticons do follow us, it's likely that hitherto Neutral colonies will ally with us, as I doubt Optimus will give them much choice." Prowl let out a long vent. "Ultimately, we will have to view Cybertron as a battle in a long, long war. It is one we will likely lose, but we haven't lost yet."

"I should return to command once Ratchet's better," said Megatron.

"It will be beneficial to keep your medical training and abilities up to date," said Prowl. "We will find a way."

"We're good at that," said Jazz, opening the door to the roof. "Come on. It's beautiful up here."

They sat on the roof, eating the energon puffs. They weren't quite as good as the confections they'd eaten while honored guests of one of Iacon's most powerful Houses, but they'd been made by Jazz and Prowl, with care and determination, and that overcame everything else. The fuel was good, sparkling and tart. The view was spectacular, a city below them like a jeweled tapestry. Megatron remembered sitting in his window at the Academy, feeling like there was so much to explore and all of it forbidden. Now it was his, a responsibility heavy on his shoulders and yet satisfying. It was not, and would not be, forbidden to him.

Nor anyone else.

He bent to brush a brief kiss against Prowl and then Jazz's mouths. They smiled up at him,

their arms around him.

"There's no place we'd rather be than at your side," said Prowl.

"From now to the end of the world," said Jazz. "And I mean that, since, you know, planetary civil war."

It made all three of them laugh. Megatron licked the last of the energon puff off his fingers, savoring it, and pulled both of them in close.

Eventually, even the roof lost its charm in the face of what they could be doing elsewhere. He followed Prowl and Jazz back to their room, since they had the bigger slab. He was already hot under his panels, as giddy as a newbuild after his final upgrades, when he had onlined his interface equipment and gone and found Impactor and neither of them had been able to walk without a limp for weeks afterward.

He'd seen Jazz and Prowl's quarters before; one tended to, when you were running a war together and waking each other up at all hours, and moreover it was identical to the layout of his own quarters, except Jazz and Prowl's had been designed for two mecha, not just one, and had a massive recharge slab in the berthroom. A handful of things—artificial lubricant, a vibrator, a pile of soft metalmesh rags—had been set out on one of the berthside tables. The cabinet below it had been left a little open. A hank of soft-looking brilliant red rope, thick enough to easily restrain a mech, hung out of it.

Megatron's intake was dry. His panels felt tight. He could all too easily imagine that rope on his plating, gently, firmly confining, while Jazz and Prowl did whatever they liked with him.

Jazz pushed the cabinet shut with a pede as he climbed onto the berth, settled down and held his arms out to Megatron. "Come and make yourself comfortable?"

Megatron wet the edges of his intake with his glossa and went, feeling Jazz's optics on his face, and Prowl's on his back. It made every bit of his plating feel electrified, and he shivered a little as he hoisted himself onto the berth, sliding toward Jazz.

"We're never going to do anything you don't want to, and you'll have to tell us if you don't like what we're doing," said Jazz. He eased Megatron back so that Megatron's head was in his lap, gently arranging Megatron's arms around his waist. He stroked Megatron's arms, elbows-to-wrist, his hands warm and wonderful. Megatron vented in, smelling his systems, his polish, and under it all a thread of arousal, hot metal and lubricant. He wanted to tilt his helm back and lick Jazz's panel. He imagined its taste, the texture of the little ridges of the armor over Jazz's spike. He wasn't going to do it until Jazz was done talking, though. "Prowl and I use 'red' when we want to stop everything, no questions asked. We like it because it's unambiguous—both of us like playing a little rough. You don't have to do that if you don't want to."

Megatron licked his lips, remembering how he'd loved being held down and fragged. It was probably one of the reasons it had been so easy to be with Optimus, the second time, the feeling of a complete surrender of control. He thought about the rope, like a promise. They wouldn't have left it visible by accident. And he wanted it. Maybe not tonight, but he wanted it. "I think rough is all right," he said.

"It's all right to experiment," Jazz told him, fingers rubbing lightly around the base of his wrists. It felt wonderful. "We can do that. Or you can tell us what you want to do. Whichever seems better to you."

Megatron looked toward the foot of the berth where Prowl perched, watching him with hooded optics. His fans were already spinning hard enough Megatron could hear their whine. "You like your valve," Prowl said. "You like being submissive. That leaves us a large number of possibilities. Do you have anything specific in mind?"

Megatron's optics tracked down Prowl's frame, squarer than Jazz's, all hard edges, elegant in its compact power, the pale blue optics watching him in turn with an icy intensity laid him bare to the struts. Prowl's face was lovely, a still cold perfection like a statue's, an ideal made living metal. He'd been built and modified to be a ruler, and had set that aside to be a good mech.

They were not so dissimilar, Megatron understood suddenly. When Prowl had spoken of saving Megatron from the mech he was being pushed to be, he knew of what he spoke. He'd fought that battle once before, when he'd chosen Jazz over power. No wonder there had been a path back from Vos. No wonder he'd made that path back for Megatron.

Prowl's lips parted slightly, looking at him, his doorwings shifting infinitesimally. That expression was hunger, Megatron realized, and moved his legs apart a little in reaction. The feeling of being wanted like this was incredible, heady and powerful. "I want to suck your spikes," he said bluntly. "And I think we should use Jazz's idea. I would very much like to be held down while you take turns using my valve."

Jazz's engine revved so hard it briefly whined. "All right. Yep. Let's do that. Absolutely no objections. Prowler?"

"I have no objections." Prowl's voice had gone rough and burred with static. He slipped down off the berth to stand. "Jazz, in what order would you like to do this?"

Megatron tilted his helm back and smiled slowly at him.

"Oh," said Jazz, a little faintly, as Megatron flicked his glossa out. "Um. I've got him right here, maybe..."

Prowl chuckled. "It would be efficient. Megatron, may I play with your valve while you suck him?"

It was Megatron's turn to rev at that. He spread his legs and opened his panels by way of an answer.

"Much appreciated," said Prowl, sounding amused. Megatron tilted his head further back and did lick Jazz's panel, the whole length.

Jazz opened up instantly. "Mech, you're gonna strain a cable in your neck if you do it like —*oooh!*"

Megatron swallowed his full length down easily and on the first try, significantly helped by his position, a really robust override for his gag reflex, and that he'd done it before with much larger partners. Jazz's vents hiccuped. Megatron slid back and said, "I'll change positions if it gets uncomfortable," before sucking the first third of Jazz's spike back into his mouth, playing with his transfluid slit. It was a really nice weight in his mouth, and he could feel little ridges and swirls under his glossa, some sort of detailing Jazz had that he wanted to get a better look at, the one detriment to his current position. But the noise Jazz had made had been worth it, so Megatron settled for sliding a little further down the spike and following the detailing with his glossa while he worked his throat around the head.

"Oh, Primus," said Jazz, a little faintly. His hips bucked. Megatron stilled them with his arms. He licked all the way up from the base of the spike back, swallowing as he did. Jazz groaned.

Hands pushed Megatron's thighs apart. Accommodating, he spread them further. Prowl's hands rested heavy around his knee joints, stroked slowly upward, teasing.

Megatron sucked on the spike in his intake. Jazz's hands tightened hard on his arms. "Well, I'm not going to—aah—I'm not going to last if you keep that up," he managed. "You're incredible at this, Megs, just incredible."

Hot wet touched the inside of Megatron's thigh, a kiss and then a lick. Fingers played with the seam on the other side. Prowl nipped him lightly, then kissed his way in toward Megatron's valve. Megatron felt himself clenching as Prowl got closer, then paused, and kissed the other side, starting to move outward again. He made a muffled protest.

"Eager," Prowl said, sounding amused. A hot intake closed over Megatron's aching node. He moaned aloud. The vibrations drew a gasp from Jazz, whose hips started moving again.

Prowl toyed with him, that was the only way to put it. Light sucks and even lighter brushes of dentae that had Megatron's concentration on Jazz stuttering, which he tried to compensate for by sucking hard when had enough processor to do so. Jazz didn't seem to mind, doubled-over and groaning. Then Prowl licked the entire length of Megatron's opening up to put firm pressure on his node and Megatron whined, frame bucking.

"Oh *Primus*," said Jazz.

"You taste delicious," Prowl told him, almost a growl. "I love how you lose all control when I play with your node. I like that a lot. You're so prettily responsive." Prowl slid a finger through his slick, over his valve, hard and firm rather than his soft wet glossa. Megatron canted his hips, trying to get him inside. Prowl lifted his finger. "Greedy. We'll fill your pretty valve later." The finger returned, tracing a ghost of a circle around his nub. "When I decide to."

Megatron frowned, and wrapped his glossa up over Jazz's spike, pulling back as he did so, then swallowing him again. His neck pinged a protest; he pulled off, said, "One moment," and turned over once Jazz and Prowl moved obligingly back. He looked up at Jazz's face, delighted to see Jazz's mouth open as he panted, the bright flush of his cheeks. He made optic contact and closed his mouth over the head of Jazz's spike, suckling at it.

"You smug fragger," said Jazz, almost a whine.

"Very smug," said Prowl, behind him. Megatron spread his legs a little more and leaned back, blatantly offering his aft and valve. "Very cocky." Prowl's fingers settled over his node, still and firm. "If you'd like that fragged out of you, we can certainly arrange that, Megatron. And you're making it *very* tempting."

Megatron pulled back off Jazz's spike. That sounded wonderful. "Do your worst." He swallowed Jazz down again, loving the way the mech's vents hitched, his abdomen rippling as he bucked upward. He bobbed his helm, swallowing Jazz down, pulling off, fragging his intake on Jazz. Jazz started to shake.

Megatron had been rocking his hips back against Prowl's fingers, gently stimulating his node that way, and startled when Prowl moved them, sliding them over his valve instead, a maddening tease with no satisfaction. Prowl waited until Megatron whined a protest and then

stilled his hips with one hand and slid a digit deep and smooth into him.

It felt *wonderful*. He wanted more. He rippled his valve around Prowl's finger, and Prowl withdrew, came back with two. He moved them apart, spreading Megatron as he held him in place. "You're dripping for this. I've hardly done anything to you yet, and you're this revved up just from sucking his spike. Are you going to be able to hold off on overloading long enough to suck mine?" He relaxed the pressure against Megatron's valve walls, fragging his fingers gently in and out as he rubbed Megatron's node. "I play with you a little and you completely forget what you're doing," he said, a gently teasing note in his voice. "I'm looking forward to seeing what a spike in here will do to you."

He had not forgotten what he was doing. Megatron sucked long and firm on Jazz's spike, running his glossa under the head, and Jazz doubled over and came down his intake with a startled shout.

Megatron swallowed it down, smirking at him. His victory was shortlived. Prowl slid a third finger into him, and he gasped, hands tightening around Jazz's waist.

"Impressive." Prowl sounded more amused than anything. "A very pretty show. But I believe you promised you'd be sucking my spike as well. Do you intend to make good on that?"

Jazz was looking up at him, visor flickering and mouth open as he panted, showing the edges of his fangs. He was actually steaming a little at the joints. Megatron gave him a long slow grin, then sat back to smirk back down at Prowl. "Of course."

The fingers slid from his valve. "Good," said Prowl. "Turn around and come here." He pointed to the ground in front of him. Megatron licked his lips, giving Jazz one last look which made the mech shiver before he obeyed.

"Very good," said Prowl. "On your knees."

A thrill of arousal stitched through Megatron. He slid to his knees, trying to keep his arrogant confidence intact, instead of the shivering anticipation Prowl's commands had woken in him. Prowl's fingers flirted around the edge of his jaw.

"May I hold and move your helm if I keep my grasp to the sides of your face?" Prowl asked. Megatron nodded.

"Good. Clasp your hands behind your back." Prowl's hand guided him down, level with his panel. It was still closed. Given that Prowl had been knuckle deep in his valve a few seconds ago, that spoke volumes about his control. Megatron gulped and put his hands behind his back as commanded, feeling his digits close around his wrist plating. Even though they were his own hands, even if it was only a verbal instruction that kept them there, it was somehow like Prowl restraining him himself.

"Good," purred Prowl, stroking the side of his face. He stepped back a little and slowly slid his spike panel aside, like he was giving a show, coordinated and deliberate. He pressurized his spike slowly and carefully as well, probably using some very creative overrides. It was a bigger spike than Megatron had expected, white with blue biolights and a black ridge underneath it, each row of smooth shining plating slightly flared, so it would catch on the nodes of a valve as Prowl withdrew.

Prowl stroked it, keeping his fingers loose so Megatron could still see it clearly. Then he slid his hand back down to the base and flexed the plating. It wasn't much, a few centimeters at

most, but Megatron imagined what it would feel like inside him and had to quash the urge to lie back right here, spread his legs, and beg for it. He was already running hot from what Prowl had been doing to him. That wasn't fair. He'd never seen a mod like that before, and he wanted to *feel* it.

Prowl stroked his spike again, making a show of it, rubbing his thumb over the transfluid slit at the top. "Jazz," he said, "I believe he might have been a little impertinent with you earlier. Do you think he really deserves to get filled up the way he's obviously begging to?"

Jazz struggled upright. "Mech, I don't care what he *deserves*," he said. "I wanna see him choking on your spike," Megatron's engine gave an involuntary rev at that, and Jazz grinned, "and then I wanna hold him down while you put it in him." He flickered half his visor at Megatron in a wink. "I have a feeling that will make him squirm real pretty. I wanna watch you take him apart. And then I'll see about getting a little of my own back."

They both paused, looking at him. It was a moment before Megatron collected himself enough from the thrill of being watched like that and realized they were also waiting to make sure he was all right with that. He thought, briefly, of Optimus and Terminus, who'd not been so clear in their concern, nothing like so careful. "Please," he said, wetting his lips. "I'll behave."

Prowl raised his optic ridge. "We'll see about that," he said. "Come here."

Megatron bent forward, and Prowl fed him his spike at a maddeningly slow pace, guiding it in until Megatron's nasal ridge bumped his pelvic plating. Prowl let out a little sigh of pleasure as Megatron swallowed around him, re-engaging the override for his gag reflex.

"Do that again," Prowl said, and Megatron obliged. Then, greatly daring, he slid his glossa along the ridge on the underside of the spike.

Prowl's hand tightened on the side of his face and he withdrew until just the head of his spike was in Megatron's mouth. "Behave," he warned. "Suck, and pay attention to my transfluid slit."

Megatron gazed up into Prowl's optics, as still as if they were discussing energon flavorings instead of Prowl commanding him to suck his spike. He squirmed his legs together, where his node was so engorged it ached, wondering what would happen if he didn't obey, if Prowl might find a way to punish him for it. The memory of how a bright burst of pain heightened interface made his vents shorten with excitement.

Prowl's mouth twisted a little with amusement, as if he knew what Megatron was thinking. "We're not doing anything rougher tonight, not before discussing it," he told Megatron. "If you don't behave, I'll pull my spike out of your mouth and frag Jazz in front of you—he's been good."

That would be fragging hot, but he wanted something in his valve too much. Megatron sucked obediently.

"Good," said Prowl, and slid smoothly in again. He fragged Megatron's intake, slow, gentle, and deliberate, a show of power and control. A promise of what he might do to Megatron's valve, which was so wet Megatron was certain there must be droplets on the floor between his legs by now. After a few moments, Prowl slid most of the way in and told Megatron to lick the edges of the plates, one at a time. Megatron groaned around the spike, feeling Prowl begin to shiver minutely.

"Very good," said Prowl, withdrawing completely, a hand tight around the base of his spike. "I'll want your valve now. Go to the berth and lie back. Give Jazz your arms if you're serious

about wanting to be held down."

Megatron wiped his intake with the back of a hand and scrambled to obey. Jazz took his forearms when he offered them and trapped them by wrapping his legs around them. He hesitated before touching Megatron's hands. "You okay if I play with these, mech?"

Megatron hesitated. He'd loved having his hands played with, especially right after the upgrades that had given him medic-sensitivity. But he was afraid of having them played with now. The memories of what Pharma had done were too visceral. "I... not right now?" he said. It was almost embarrassing, but... "Can you...hold them?"

"Like this?" asked Jazz, interlacing their fingers. Megatron nodded. "All right, Prowler, we're ready for you."

Prowl climbed up onto the berth, looking fond. He leaned forward and kissed Jazz, then bent to kiss Megatron in turn, gentle and commanding. He nibbled and kissed his way down Megatron's front to his pelvis, sucking briefly at the head of his jutting spike as he worked his fingers into him once again, gathering up Megatron's own slick before fisting his spike with his hand, one, two, three pumps and then pushing in.

Megatron moaned aloud, split open and incredibly vulnerable, every plate of his body electrified and on display for them. He had a faint fantasy of them later turning him to one side, his legs together, and taking him at the same time, all but ignoring him as they had what they wanted.

He wondered, briefly, if after everything he should want this kind of surrender at all, but Jazz's hands felt wonderful and intimate around him, and Prowl was so good inside him, and he loved the way they were watching him, both commanding and cherishing. Like he was intensely precious and at the same time a toy for their convenience, and the combination had him revving desperately hard.

Prowl rippled his plating inside him. Megatron gasped and jolted.

"Very good," Prowl said. "Do you want me to draw it out, Megatron? Do you want me to do this slow so you squirm and fall apart and beg, or do you want me to take what I desire, to hold you open and pound your lovely frame into the berth?" He fragged long and slow and deep into Megatron's body, hitting something incredibly sweet within him that made him gasp something near a sob. "There are so many ways I want to take this silken tight valve," said Prowl, almost crooning. His hands pet soothing circles on Megatron's plating. "You choose, beloved. Do you want me to savor you," he slid slowly out to emphasize his point, "or claim you?"

Jazz's fans sped up. His hips twitched a little.

He couldn't bear more of that. He needed something. Something concrete. "Be rough with me," Megatron said. "Please, Prowl, what part of *use my valve* don't you—aaaah!"

Prowl pushed back in hard, shifting his weight. "Very well," his voice almost like his usual except for a faint burr of static under it. "You asked for it."

Megatron whined and tried to squirm to meet him with each thrust. Prowl's hands came down hard on his pelvis, holding him in place. "You take this," said Prowl. "Stay still and let me have you."

Megatron whined. Prowl's spike filled him comfortably, the flex of his plates catching and *plucking* nodes, something just this side of pain. Jazz's hands were gentle around him, though he

could smell the gathering lubricant under the other mech's panel.

Prowl's hands slid sensuous under his thighs, hooking and lifting so his thighs spread up and out, presenting his valve to Prowl's use. Prowl purred, watching it, his spike plunging deep into Megatron's quivering valve.

Megatron went limp against Jazz's hold, optics fluttering closed, and lost himself in the sensation of being held down and taken and *used*, thrilling to the way Prowl's vents sped, the way he pushed in deep and hard and ground against his ceiling node, like he was here to take everything of pleasure he could from Megatron's frame, here to pillage and conquer and enjoy. His thighs quivered under Prowl's hands; his fingers worked within Jazz's, each moment of contact a spark of pleasure. An unbearable sweetness coiled inside of him, around his node and deep around Prowl's spike, and Prowl let go of his thighs and reached up to pull him forward into a deep kiss and Megatron came undone with Prowl pushing deep and commanding into his mouth.

Prowl's rhythm stuttered at that, and then he slammed back in hard a few more times, hiccupped a startled gasp, and stilled while Megatron's valve was still spasming from his own overload.

Megatron met his optics, saw the mech looked, if anything, a little startled. He pulled out, slowly, and then smiled a little, his cold and commanding demeanor melting away. "I'd planned to take you through a few more overloads," he said, "but that may have to wait for another time."

"Perhaps a time with the rope?" Megatron asked, still a little breathless.

"Absolutely," said Prowl, his engine revving. He went and got one of the metalmesh towels. "Do you need anything?"

The sensitivity of his valve was starting to ebb, and Megatron almost said, *how about Jazz's spike*, but Jazz had reached over to the berthside table and was now waving a rust stick under his nasal ridge. Megatron just leaned out to bite it.

"You wanna be on your front or your back for this one?" asked Jazz. "If you're still up. Heh."

"I definitely want you," said Megatron firmly. "As for position, I'd like you to choose."

"Mmm," said Jazz, a hungry noise. "All right. You need any coolant with that rust stick? Then turn over."

Megatron obeyed, acutely aware of the cool air on his dripping valve. "Keep your chest down and raise your aft," said Jazz. He got up, going around to the bottom of the berth. Prowl changed places with him. "That's great, mech, now spread your legs more. I wanna see everything. Hm, do you ever like it in your aft?"

"Yes," said Megatron.

"All right. Later on that might be fun, one of us in your valve one in your aft. But right now..." Fingers trailed over him and he should have been dulled to sensation there by now, but instead he was extra sensitive, flinching under Jazz's fingers with delicious anticipation, "right now I want this."

Megatron moaned into the berth.

"You liked my spike enough in your intake," Jazz went on. "I got a feeling you're gonna

like it even more here. You want Prowler to hang onto you?"

Megatron managed a little nod, moving to accommodate Prowl coming to his side and pulling his arms into his lap to pin them. "Is that all right?"

"Yes," said Megatron, already thrilling with vulnerability. "Yes, please just take me. Please, Jazz!"

Jazz chuckled and rubbed his node a little, clearly amused at Megatron's needy whines. "Listen to yourself, mech. No one would believe Prowl had just fragged you silly." He slid his fingers away; Megatron tried to follow him with his hips. "You're incredibly powerful. Strong. Tough. And you're putting it all in our hands. That's fragging hot, mech. I wanna feel you come apart under me. Come on, Megs, tell me how much you want me."

Megatron bit his lip, flushing with embarrassment at the idea of voicing what he wanted on request. But it was a good kind of embarrassment, something that had his arousal skyrocketing and his valve clenching. He felt something dribble out of him. Jazz made a sound like a low purr.

"I want your spike," he said. "Please, stop teasing me, I want your spike filling me up." He fluttered his valve again, this time deliberately, and looked over his shoulder. Despite his teasing voice, Jazz was flushed, venting through his mouth as well, his optics bright behind his visor, fixed on his valve. Megatron shifted his hips, making his aft sway a little.

"Yeah," said Jazz sounding a little staticky, "I guess I asked for that. Damn." He rose up onto his knees and parted Megatron's valve with his fingers. Megatron whimpered a little, feeling incredibly exposed. "Primus, your valve is so pretty. Your nodes are so bright, mech, you're running hot, huh?"

Megatron gasped as the blunt head of Jazz's spike nudged him. It was solid and firm, a little wider than Prowl's, and the engravings he'd found while sucking it were just prominent enough to catch on his nodes and stimulate them even more.

Jazz slid into him with one long slow movement and ground his hips. Megatron bucked with a whine as something at the base of Jazz's spike rubbed his node, a firm textured little ridge. "Yeah," said Jazz, pleased with himself. "Yeah that's all for you, mech."

Jazz stroked the length of his back. "You're so good. You're doing so good. Lean a little forward, there's a good mech."

Megatron was venting hard, stuffed full with that little ridge playing with his nodes as Jazz shifted his hips a little at the time. "Don't gotta go fast to claim you," he said. "You're all stuffed full and filled up, huh? All full of me and revving for it. I could stay in you all night, you're so snug and good. Would you like it if I just slid into you and read reports while you made me feel good? Just sort of ignored you while you whined and clenched and squirmed?" His hips began working a little more, nudging Megatron's internal nodes as well as his external node, and Megatron did whine and squirm under it, because it felt incredible and was hardly more than a tease. "Or maybe," Jazz's voice lowered, and he suddenly slid all the way out before plunging back in again with a long smooth motion, leaving Megatron empty just long enough to whine with loss before he was split wide again, "I just have you long and slow and gentle and have you come to bits by centimeters, huh?"

"Please," said Megatron, and Jazz pulled out of him again, rubbing the head of his spike at his entrance teasingly before pushing forward again.

"Yeah, that's it," said Jazz. "Love how your calipers clench down, like you're trying to hold onto me. Love this. I could do this for hours, mech. You're so good. You're so pretty like this, wanting this so much. I want you overloading on my spike. I want you overloading again and again until you're limp with it, I wanna make you feel better than you've ever felt in your life. You think you can do that for me, Megatron?"

Prowl's hands were tight on his arms, and Megatron could hear the other mech's ventilations pick up. He turned his head to look at Prowl; the other mech's mouth was slightly open, optics bright and fixed on Jazz's spike where it slid into Megatron's body. Megatron imagined, briefly, being secured to the head of the berth as Jazz took him and Prowl watched, servo on his spike, waiting his turn, his optics fixed in the same way on the stretch of his valve. He imagined what it might feel like to have both of them in him, maybe even kissing each other as they plundered his frame. He shivered with a minor peak of charge.

Jazz reached down to rub his node. "I wanna feel you overload," he purred. "How would you like a vibrator here, Megs? I bet it'd make you feel really fragging good. You wanna try that?"

It was all so good, he didn't want it to be over, but he was desperate for more. "You... you won't stop, will you?"

"I'll stay right here," Jazz promised. "I just bet it'll make it really intense."

Really intense, all at their mercy. Megatron nodded. "Please."

"Perfect," said Jazz. "Prowler, can you..."

"Here," Prowl handed it over. "Continue." Megatron's position let him have a glimpse of Prowl's face, a slight smile. "You have a wicked mind, my love."

"Hoped you'd be enjoying the show," said Jazz, taking the vibrator. "I love it when he does this to me," he told Megatron. "I hope you love it too."

Megatron squirmed under him, trying to frag himself on Jazz's spike. What Jazz was doing to him wasn't enough.

"Patience," said Jazz with a laugh, putting a hand on his aft. He moved back a little, and the rounded rubbery tip of the vibrator nudged Megatron's node. "Gonna start low, we can move up. Just don't know how sensitive you are."

"More," Megatron gasped. "I'm not delicate, please Jazz."

"We've got the really big spike sheathe," Prowl said, thoughtfully. "One of us should frag him with that, sometime."

"There's a lot of stuff we'd love to do with you sometime," said Jazz, and turned the vibrator on. Megatron gasped and jolted, the pleasure liquid and urgent inside of him, like a minor overload but it kept building. Jazz held the vibrator steady, gently thrusting, and Megatron realized he didn't intend to overload right now, he was drawing it out, he'd been really serious about wanting to watch him come apart.

Yes, yes, *Primus*, he wanted to overload on Jazz's spike and have Jazz keep using him through it, have Jazz overload him again and again with a grin, unaffected while he fell apart over and over with Jazz's hard spike deep inside him, used like a toy. "More," he managed, and Jazz clicked the vibrator up two settings at once and Megatron did overload, hard, muffling a cry in Prowl's lap.

Jazz groaned, pushing deep inside him as his valve spasmed, dropped the vibrator and began to frag him in earnest, moving deep and smooth and steady. The overload seemed to stretch forever, leaving him limp and shaking, his knees going from under him. Jazz pulled out, adjusting him so he lay on his side, legs together, valve still trembling and exposed. Jazz held his legs together and slid himself back in, hitting new nodes as he started again. Megatron's vents sobbed with every movement, his hands shaking on the sheets. When it finally ebbed enough for him to think, Jazz was still in him, vents ragged. Megatron looked up, realizing Prowl had started pressurizing again. Megatron wondered about trying to suck him, but with what Jazz was doing he couldn't concentrate enough to ask. His processor was spinning, the world narrowed down to the feeling of being confined and used, the pleasure of Jazz enjoying him.

Jazz's fingers dipped down to his node again, rubbing. It felt totally different from the vibrator, a growing warm sensitivity. Megatron's valve rippled in response. Jazz gasped a little. "Primus, all right, I don't know how you do it, Prowl, I just need—"

"If he wants more after this I think I can step in," said Prowl, sounding amused. "I think he likes the feeling of you taking your pleasure more than anything—Megatron, am I correct."

Megatron swallowed. "Yes," he rasped. Jazz's hands turned him over further, splaying him out on his back, and Prowl readjusted his helm and shoulders, cradling him tenderly as Jazz tugged him into position, holding his hips in a tight grip and slamming into him hard enough to make him cry out and arc, every node stimulated at once.

Jazz fragged him hard, with all the considerable strength in his deceptively slender frame, pointed dentae on display as he vented hard, his visor blazing. "You're just—so good--!"

Megatron clutched at Prowl's armor, trying to prop himself up a little with his exhausted frame to better watch what Jazz was doing to him. He felt his next overload approaching, his sensitive metals already tender, every one of Jazz's movements like fire across his sensor net, so acute as to almost be painful but incredibly, incredibly seductive and wonderful. Jazz's pace stuttered, his mouth opened, and he slowed. Megatron felt his transfluid spatter hot inside of him. Jazz withdrew after a long moment, groped for the vibrator and turned it on with hands that shook. He held Megatron's node in place, made optic contact. "Means I can watch you on this one," he said, and slowly lowered the tip of the vibrator to touch it to Megatron's node.

Megatron gasped, hands clenching harder; he'd only just begun coming down from the peak of arousal when Jazz had withdrawn, and this brought it rocketing back up all at once. Jazz thumbed the intensity up, and Megatron bit down a wail and overloaded almost instantly, vents shuddering through it.

When it was over, he slumped strutlessly onto the berth. Prowl gently lowered him onto it, digging briefly in one of the storage cupboards underneath to retrieve some battered pillows which he tucked around Megatron. He put a cube of coolant in Megatron's hands. "I'm still hard," he murmured, gesturing at the still-panting Jazz, "and he's still wet. Would you like to watch us?"

Megatron thought, briefly, that he might have liked to take a more active role, but his interface protocols had turned themselves off and were flatly refusing to reactivate. "Yes," he rasped, and Jazz grinned at him and wriggled into his lap, draping himself over Megatron's front and canting his aft up to give Megatron a full view of his valve, which was indeed shining with lubricant.

"One day, it might be fun to have Prowl order you to hold me down and frag me," he said. "You know, if you think that would be fun. I like fragging you full too, though."

Prowl climbed up behind him, leaning forward to press a long sucking kiss to Jazz's valve. Jazz let out a little breathy moan and wiggle, pushing closer to Megatron. Prowl lifted his head and smiled at Megatron, lifting his spike and giving it a long stroke before sliding deep into Jazz. Jazz pressed himself down, exaggerating the curve of his aft, showing off how his valve stretched around Prowl.

Prowl let out a long breath. Then he rose up on his knees and started fragging Jazz with short, sharp thrusts. Jazz clutched at Megatron, mouthing at his chest and abdomen, doorwings bouncing with each thrust. Megatron reached out tentatively to pet at Jazz's doorwings and was rewarded with a loud moan and Prowl's gasp as Jazz's valve clenched around him. Megatron took that as encouragement, petting and fondling.

Neither Prowl nor Jazz lasted much longer after that. Jazz overloaded silently, burying his face in Megatron's chest as he did, and Prowl followed him over, pulling him back firmly onto his spike and staying there, doorwings trembling, before pulling out to collapse limply next to Megatron.

They all lay there and gasped for a while.

"Thank frag," said Jazz at last, "we have a washracks in here."

Chapter 106

They were incredibly gentle and attentive cleaning him up. They buffed their paint transfers out, checked and eased strained cables, and Megatron tilted Prowl's face up to kiss him, enjoying the unassuming tenderness. Then they went back, cleaned off the berth, and shared the remaining rust sticks.

He slipped into recharge almost as soon as the last rust stick was split between them.

He was on the battlefield again, the scrape of Tarn's internal components against his blade and vibrating down his arm. Tarn stared into his optics, and one of his hands came up to clasp Megatron's arm. It didn't feel right. Megatron looked down and found it blunt and gray, the friendly shapes of Terminus's hand.

He looked back at Tarn's face, but it wasn't Tarn, rounding back into Terminus's familiar face, blue optics wide, a trickle of energon running from his slack mouth. He wasn't holding a weapon, just kneeling there with Megatron's blade through him. His face was blank with shock, betrayed. A little optical lubricant leaked from his left optic, his vents gathering in a dry sob.

Megatron couldn't meet his gaze, dropped his optics to his sword where it had torn deep into Terminus's body. He couldn't stand it. He retracted the blade, remembering too late it was the wrong thing to do, that it would make Terminus leak out faster. He was a medic. He should have known better.

Terminus slumped forward onto him, his frame shuddering with the high horrible noises of pain Megatron remembered so well from the mines. Megatron laid him out at his pedes and tried to get to work but his hands wouldn't cooperate, spasming, slipping.

"You'll fix it," Terminus managed. "You can fix it, can't you, Megatron?" He whimpered a little, optics blowing wide, seeing something that wasn't there, like the dying Megatron had nursed on so many battlefields. "Megatron, I don't want to die."

"It's all right," said Megatron, but he heard panic high in his voice. "It's all right, Terminus. I've got you. I've got you. You're going to be okay."

"I don't want to die," Terminus said, pitiful. "I don't want to die like this. With you like this. Please Megatron, come back to me?"

"I'm right here." There was gray spreading from Terminus's injury. "I'm right here, Terminus, I'm not going anywhere."

"You left me." A whisper. "You left me."

He couldn't work fast enough. He couldn't do the repairs. He could feel Terminus stuttering, failing under his fingertips, his uncooperative fingertips. They flickered in his sensornet, turning into something wrong, the claws again. He couldn't save Terminus. Terminus was going to die.

"It hurts, Megatron. It hurts, please make it stop. Help me," said Terminus. His optics were fading, energon spattering his lips with each vent. Megatron could still feel the tackiness of the blade in his arm. Terminus turned his helm, focused on him.

"I love you. Why did you..." his hand came up to his chest, feeling for the terrible wound. "You did this. You left me."

His frame spasmed, his chest flaring with light. "You killed me," he said, even as his spark burned out in a flare of brilliant light, and it echoed in Megatron's audials even though he pushed his hands over them, even when the smoking gray corpse slumped on the ground.

A hand touched his shoulder. It trailed across to the back of his helm, his neck. He realized his helmet was gone, his brain unprotected.

"You should have cooperated," said Trepan's voice behind him. Megatron wanted to whirl and attack, but he couldn't move. He stayed where he was, staring at Terminus's gray corpse. "I changed him into the worst monster either of you could imagine, and you had to kill him yourself, you even *wished* for it, by the end. You should have been obedient." He could feel fingers on his brain. His vents came faster, panic. "You should have given that speech. It was one speech, Megatron. Yet here we are."

Trepan leaned in. "Terminus is dead. Look at him. *Look* at him, Megatron. You did that. You did that with your own hands. You cut him open. You gutted him. Look at him. He loved you. He loved you *so much*."

"I couldn't sacrifice our future for one mech," Megatron said, his voice dull to his own audials. He remembered clearly, Terminus lifting his face to kiss him, Terminus's arms around him.

"But didn't you?" asked Trepan. "The fate of Cybertron was in your hands and you chose Ratchet. No, Megatron, you don't get to pretend you did this out of a misplaced sense of heroism. You just did the equations, and Terminus *lost*."

Terminus's empty optics stared at him, through him. There was something in his hands. He could move his head; he tilted it down, away from Trepan.

He was holding Tarn's mask.

"You put that on him," said Trepan, in front of him, and small golden brown hands closed around his.

There was a spatter of energon on the mask.

"You put that on him," Trepan repeated. "What I did to him was only the beginning. He fought me, you know. I wasn't entirely successful in reprogramming him. But what I left behind... I left his devotion to your cause intact. I just eroded his trust in you. I changed how he thought of you. He did love you, upon a time. He loved you so he wasn't sure he could turn you into what Cybertron needed, that his mercy would get in the way, that his fondness for you wouldn't let him push you to be the weapon your kind needed."

Trepan's fingers dug into Megatron's hands hard, and he felt the metal deform like it was still soft from Pharma's welder. He gasped with pain and remembered panic.

"You think what he did to you was bad?" Trepan said. "What I did to him was only the beginning. They pulled him to pieces. They made him suffer. And I watched him scream. Years of slow, careful reformatting. That's what we did to him. We turned him into a weapon, activated if we died. And we died."

Trepan's voice turned wheedling. "He could have been so much, Megatron. So much potential. A lieutenant to last the ages. And you threw him away."

The sensation of his blade plunging through Tarn's chest again; Megatron opened his optics to find Terminus there, even as he pushed the blade deeper, dragging it down.

"You. You did this," said Trepan behind him. "Look into his face, Megatron. Tell me you don't regret it."

Megatron did. Terminus's mouth worked, surprise, and his hand came around the back of Megatron's unprotected head and pulled him in and Terminus kissed him with familiar beloved lips that tasted of his life fluids.

"It's all right," he said. "I still love you. I forgive you," and his corpse slid from Megatron's blade to fall into the muck of the battlefield.

"You never really mattered," Trepan said, behind him. "You weren't the mastermind, Megatron. You just made pretty words and lovely promises. He was the one running the revolution. He was the one doing what had to be done. He was the *threat*. And you killed him. You killed him like he didn't matter and turned and threw yourself into the arms of new lovers to bury your guilt." He raised a hand; Optimus knelt there. "As if you value any of them any more than you did him. Look at him. You wanted to kill him, you still want to kill him. How long is this new infatuation to last? Or—" He blurred, and Megatron tried to slash at him, moving slow and grieved and confused, and his blade connected, but it was Jazz there, staring at him with shock and half his fuel assembly hanging out, "will you forget about them as quickly?"

Jazz whimpered, reaching past him. Megatron glanced over his shoulder. Prowl's corpse was already there, gray and still and twisted horribly.

"You're either a leader or you aren't," said Trepan's voice, and Megatron whirled, looking for him, trying to ignore the sensation of Jazz's body falling from his sword. "You're either a rebel or you aren't. How does it feel, knowing you finished my work for me?"

Megatron snarled into the air.

"You're protecting the nobles," said Trepan. "My work. You abandoned the downtrodden. Optimus has them now. Did you ever get free of me? If you did, you've been working for me of your own accord. What can you bear better, Megatron, that your mind is not your own, or that you *chose* to become the evil you fought?"

Megatron turned again, cornered, panicking, stumbled, fell, and kept falling, his vision going black. He flailed, reaching for something, anything. Once he thought he saw a wisp of something like Terminus; he grabbed for its hand but it melted away.

You cannot place the life of one mech above that of your people, said a voice, overwhelming and silent at the same time. He knew that. It was the Matrix. He bared his dentae, still falling.

"One mech might well mean all of us," he said aloud, but the darkness ate his words and they seemed trite and false.

You will kill our home, said the Matrix. *You have set your feet upon the path to kill our home!*

"But not our people!" Megatron cried. "That's what matters! That's why I started this war! It's not about Cybertron, it's about us! And I'm not bowing to any god who thinks otherwise!"

He slammed into the ground hard enough to drive the ventilations from his frame, turned

over to find himself in a great space, the feet of the Primal throne. He looked up; above him, the Primes of old stood, blue optics icy and fixed on him.

"It's about the Cybertronian people," he said. "And you—*all of you!*—you ignored them! The war was worth it, to get the chains off our necks. I'm here to serve our people, to save them, because every last one of them matters!"

He'd started to push himself up, but with a great crash, the corpse of the Decepticon he'd killed, the one who had shot the miner, fell in front of him. He recoiled, and found Terminus's gray hand on his arm.

Do they? demanded the Matrix. *Or are you just playing favorites?*

Chapter 107

Megatron rolled upright with a terrified gasp, his vents working overtime in the cool, still room. Next to him, Jazz sat up as well.

"Megs? Hey. Megatron. You know where you are?"

Megatron looked wildly around, trying to pick out something to ground himself with.

"You're in our quarters," said Jazz. "You're in Autobot Command, in Iacon. You need the date?"

"No," murmured Megatron. "No." He was still panting, and the terror wasn't abating any for knowing where he was.

"No matter what your processor is telling you, you are safe," said Prowl, next to him. Megatron stared into the darkness, then realized his cheeks were wet with optical lubricant.

"I...I can't," Megatron started, and Jazz said, "Can we touch you? Give you something else to focus on?"

Megatron bobbed his head in a nod. It couldn't make it worse. Jazz reached to embrace him and he wrapped an arm around him in turn, pulling Prowl in as well and burying his face into the gap between them. He started to sob, like he couldn't help himself.

"Yeah, that's it," said Jazz. "Just let it out."

"It helps to talk about it," said Prowl. "Trust me."

"Terminus," Megatron said. "I killed him."

"That wasn't Terminus you killed," said Jazz.

"I made the choice that turned him into Tarn," Megatron said. "It was my decision. I made that choice."

"It was the mecha who mutilated him who turned him into Tarn," said Prowl.

"I let them do that," said Megatron. "I refused to cooperate—Trepan told me exactly what he intended. I knew what I was sending him to and I still did it." He buried his face in his hands, feeling acutely the differences between them and his old hands, his *real* hands, and shuddered. "I could have saved him," he whispered. "I could have saved him and instead..."

"You started the revolution we needed," said Prowl.

"If I did that, why didn't I kill Optimus?" It was a question he never would have voiced otherwise, but it was late, and he was tired and scraped raw by the dream. "Was it simply that I valued Ratchet more?"

"It was because it was more possible," Jazz said. "You knew you would only have bought them off a little, agreeing with them to save Terminus. But Ratchet was right there. And you were able to save him with your own hands, not your cooperation. We may well have another chance at Optimus. Don't regret your mercy."

"The Matrix does," said Megatron.

"The Matrix is full of it," said Jazz. "Megs. Megatron. Hey, look at me. Or Prowl, your pick. You're here, you're okay, Ratchet is okay. Just look—yeah, there you go." Megatron managed to make optic contact with him, still feeling shaken and ill. "You're not going to make the right decisions all the time," Jazz said. "But you can settle for making the ones you can live with. Could you have lived with Ratchet dying?"

Megatron shuddered again, and the horror that had swamped him on the battlefield came creeping back.

"Megatron, he can save hundreds—maybe even thousands of lives. He can train new medics. From a frankly utilitarian standpoint, you did a wise thing. We may well get another chance at Optimus."

"The Matrix doesn't think so," Megatron said.

"Well, then the Matrix should have piped up earlier about letting Ratchet onto the battlefield in the first place." Jazz's smile was gentle, but Megatron saw all too clearly the way he'd grayed out on the point of his sword. He found himself scrabbling at his arm plating, trying to find the maintenance hatch.

"Megatron," Prowl said, commanding, and were he anything but desperate he would have stopped.

"My sword," he said. "The one under here. I—I don't want it."

"From everything I've heard, it's saved your life twice," said Prowl, his voice still gentle. Megatron cast a desperate glance back at him where he leaned against his shoulder. There was concern on his faceplates. Megatron hadn't entirely expected that.

"I don't want to kill you," he said. "I don't want to—to—I don't want it to be like him."

"Must have been one frag of a nightmare," said Jazz. Megatron offlined his optics, but he could still see Jazz's body, Prowl's, still feel the scrape on his blade.

"I saw you die," he confessed. "Like Tarn. Like I wanted to kill Optimus. After both of them, why the frag do you *trust* me?"

"Impactor's fine," said Prowl, dry.

"I almost attacked you when you stopped me," Megatron said. He'd come so close to acting out that dream. He could still remember the visceral jolt of rage.

"You didn't," said Jazz. "Hey, Prowl, let's get the lights on, yeah?"

Prowl obliged, casting the room into a familiar golden glow. The fear ebbed a little; everything looked so ordinary.

"We move too fast?" Jazz asked. "It's been a lot, these last few days."

Megatron shook his helm. "I didn't want to wait," he said. "It was only a dream."

"With that thing in you, I doubt it's just a dream," said Jazz, aiming a glare at his chestplates. "We get it, the Matrix is angry at you for not killing Optimus, but that doesn't give it

the right to do things like this to you."

Megatron managed to vent a few more times.

"Terminus meant a lot to you, even if he betrayed you," said Prowl. "It's understandable it would hit you hard, particularly in combination with the Matrix's well-established penchant for meddling. Arcee did warn you that it's hard on its bearers, and it does not surprise me that it is continuing to find new ways to get what it wants from you."

Prowl's analysis put it in a neat box, let Megatron pull himself a little more from the clutching grasp of his dreams. He was grieved, he realized. The exaltation he'd felt when Tarn collapsed, the delight in revenge—it had left him. He couldn't forget who Tarn had been. He couldn't forget the mech he'd loved. He couldn't forget that he'd killed him, either through the decision he'd made when he'd Ascended or on that battlefield, and he so desperately wanted to mourn him as Terminus, even if Terminus had simply meant to use him—a conclusion that had become utterly inescapable even in his own spark. All the times Terminus had urged Megatron to leave him behind. All the times Terminus had made decisions for him, how he'd handled being taken away the first time, his sad smile and *I know*, his hand tight in Megatron's own. Their love had never been about the two of them.

And Trepan had perverted that into Tarn, taking Terminus's choices, made with pain and regret, and turning them into someone who felt no regret whatsoever about shaping Megatron into what he wanted him to be, and torturing him when he failed to cooperate. Megatron was sure that Terminus had harbored some dream, somewhere, that they could have had a future together in the new world that they'd build. He remembered reaching for it as well, right up until Trepan had thrust that speech into his hand and shattered it forever.

Tarn hadn't been the mech Megatron had loved, but neither had he been someone else. The worst of Terminus had looked at him through the eyeslits of Tarn's mask, and that, above all, was what made what Trepan had done so obscene. No mech should be reduced to their demons alone; no mech should die that way. Megatron hadn't always acknowledged the evils that Terminus was capable of, but he'd accepted them as Terminus had accepted his own in turn—as lovers did. Seeing them laid bare, feeling them in his spark, that was still utterly unbearable, and the hatred he'd been able to direct at Tarn had only alleviated them for a while. Now, Tarn was dead, and Megatron was confronted with his memories of Terminus in equal measure. The horror of it, the full impact of what he'd sacrificed Terminus to, threatened to swamp him, and with it came the guilt and relief of saving Ratchet, and a swooping elated terror of the mecha holding him right now.

Terminus had gone so wrong, and so had Optimus, and the idea of Jazz or Prowl looking at him with hatred wrenched his spark. He was deadly afraid of this deeply precious thing they were offering him, and he couldn't live without it.

It had been easier with their hands on him, rough and taking, and seeing their pleasure. That was just interface. Interface wasn't threatening. He knew he was doing well by them from their noises of satisfaction, and he didn't have to be afraid of betraying or sacrificing them. But this wasn't in any way a purely carnal thing—they'd crept into his spark long ago.

He'd found himself turned against two mecha he'd felt this way about. He didn't want it to happen again, and here he was curled over himself with terror in the night, and the humiliation that they might see this weakness choked him. They were looking at him so kindly. It hurt.

He vented, and tried to gather himself together again.

"I shouldn't burden you with this," he said aloud. His voice was rough, burred with static. His hands didn't feel like his, wrong in ways he couldn't put into words. The track of wetness on his face shamed him. "I have no *right* to—"

"You stuffed half my tank back in," Jazz said. "You've had a good rummage in my internals. Next to that, sex or midnight panic attacks is hardly intimate."

"You brought me back from Praxus," said Prowl. "You gave me something to live for. You're allowed to be vulnerable."

He still felt as if he'd let them down. He stared down at his hands, gilded with light. "They don't feel like mine," he said, because he had nothing else to say.

Jazz made a little whine of sympathy and leaned against him. "We've got similar hand designs," he said. "Mine are geared for stuff like lockpicking and detecting poisons but the enervation is the same. These are still my originals but that first case I worked with Prowler here, the mecha who grabbed me really did some damage. I got through some of it by pretending like my hands weren't mine, neural connection that intelligence mecha have for resisting interrogation, but frag, afterward was a fragging problem. Took a full century before I wasn't feeling like my hands weren't mine at least once a month. Isn't fragged up to feel like that."

Megatron felt very tired now. He leaned against Prowl's shoulder, still looking at his hands, and let Prowl slip him gently down onto the recharge slab. Prowl and Jazz snuggled down to either side of him. He vented out, taking comfort in the warm, alive frames pressed up against his flanks.

"We're here for you. For all the nightmares," said Prowl.

"Yeah, and the Matrix can frag right off," said Jazz.

Morning came as if nothing had happened, the horror of the dream and the embarrassment of his breakdown mere ghosts. Megatron sat up tentatively, hoping he wouldn't disturb either of his partners, but both stirred at his first motions and sat up as well, blinking at him, Prowl offering him an endearing sleepy smile, and Jazz wrapping an arm around his waist and snuggling in close.

"Hi there, handsome," he said. "Wanna frag?"

"He's probably sore," started Prowl, not inaccurately, but Megatron couldn't resist. He sank back onto the berth on his side, offering Jazz his aft.

"I want it if you do," he said, and Prowl's engine purred with anticipation. Megatron tilted his aft back a little more to Jazz, transforming his panels out of the way as he guided Prowl's fingers to his node.

"You want it in your aft?" Jazz asked, confirming and gleeful.

"Yes," Megatron said. He hissed a vent as Prowl's fingers worked over his slit. He was already lubricating fast. He wanted to forget his weakness. He wanted to be reassured they still wanted him. He wanted to offer something in turn. He wanted to lose himself in feeling, not regrets.

"Both of us in you at once," said Prowl, thoughtful, and smiled slow and wicked at him. "I look forward to it." His fingers worked deeper, more firmly. Jazz had gotten something from the berthside table, and a moment later cool slick fingers touched Megatron's diagnostic port, massaging gently.

He moaned a little as the first breached him, loving the gentle slow movements of them both in him, feeling himself going strutless and trusting. He watched Prowl's face, the firm line of his mouth slackening as his fingers worked, his optics paling with charge. It was his body doing this to Prowl. Prowl let his spike pressurize with a knowing look at Megatron's face, and Megatron's valve fluttered around his fingers.

Jazz opened him up slowly, his body sparking with tenderness, a sensitivity much like pleasure that slowly blended into one acute sensation with what Prowl was doing. At last, Prowl lifted his thigh to drape it over his hip and moved in close, working his spike into him with little motions until it sat snugly inside of him.

Jazz kept working him while Prowl lay there, a hand on Megatron's waist, searching his face. He pushed in a little further for a kiss to Megatron's nose, then his mouth, a lavishing of attention. Megatron heard his own vents hitch, dropped his hands to Prowl's body to explore it as Jazz pressed long and firm up against him and began to slide in.

They took him tenderly, petting him and one another with long, languid motions, hands pausing to marvel over plating and protoform. It was incredibly comforting, a long gentle build of pleasure nothing like what they'd shared the night before. It was what he needed, right now.

He closed his optics and focused on the twin sensations of them in him, the stretch of his diagnostic port, the way Prowl was deep inside of him. The pleasure built slow and satisfying, and his first overload took him by surprise. Jazz finished first, staying inside him as Prowl's movements stuttered as he tripped into his own overload and slid from him, rubbing his node with fingers until Megatron overloaded again.

They took him to the washracks after that, made sure they all looked presentable, and then kissed him and each other, tender and treasuring.

"Megatron, we'll see you in the afternoon for the joint briefing," said Prowl, as soon as the door of their quarters closed behind them, all business, and that, too, was something of a relief. They didn't expect everything to change because they'd all fragged.

That was all right. That he could do.

He looked at them, really seeing how they returned his gaze, the tenderness, the kindness, and he hoped there was something of the same in his own optics. "And in the evening for fuel, I hope," he said.

"Rearranging the schedule now," said Jazz, cheerfully. "Have a good day, Megs."

"I will," Megatron said, because the horror of the Matrix hadn't survived their affection.

All would be well. The three of them would make sure of it.

Chapter 108

"We've retaken all the territory the Autobots captured in their last incursion," said Starscream. "They've abandoned that area and withdrawn about a hundred kilometers to their original line, presumably with significant quantities of energon and industrial-grade heat-resistant plating. They stripped the factories there of scrap metal as well." He frowned, staring into the strategy table. "They're behaving like scavengers," he said at last. "Not an organized army. Either we've stressed Megatron's supply lines far more severely than anticipated, or he's planning something."

"New Autobot offensive: Tegan Heights," said Soundwave. "Decepticon mining operations primary target. Both raw ores and mining equipment stolen. Hit and run incidents: occurring on Kaonian outskirts as well."

"Megatron's stopped fighting like he's leading an army," said Starscream. "He's fighting like an insurgent." He looked up at Optimus, optics flaring. "He's fighting like he thinks he's *losing*."

"The Autobots are far less numerous than we are," said Optimus slowly. "Yet, this seems premature. Megatron has enough of an army to face us squarely; why has he switched to this so suddenly?"

"We have air superiority, and Prowl is a competent strategist. They may have decided to shift their tactics to suit a smaller, more mobile fighting force," said Starscream.

"It is what I would recommend we do if we had an expensive project vital to the war effort," Shockwave said. They all turned to look at him.

"Autobot raids have been targeting materials useful in any large construction or industrial endeavor," he elaborated, staring down at the map. "They are collecting resources, not fighting a war."

"What project could be more important than winning?" Optimus wondered, looking at Iacon's small bright glow on the map. Megatron was there, plotting.

Starscream came up beside him, wings lowering. "One that could *end* the war."

They'd had a few days of rest before news arrived about Decepticon encroachment on Polyhex. Some bright fragger in Decepticon command had evidently gone *frag it* about abusing prisoner of war rights in a whole new way, and within days there were some very ugly reports about forced labor from the areas they'd overrun.

That wouldn't stand. Megatron wouldn't let that stand. He gathered up Rodimus, the new commander Tyrest had recommended, Ultra Magnus, and most of the Wreckers, let Jazz organize the materials-retrieval and support parts of the mission, and headed for Polyhex.

He'd half-expected Jazz to object. The sting of what Tarn had done was still fresh and terrible, and he'd assumed that Jazz and Prowl's protectiveness would increase a thousandfold after they'd actually fragged, but Jazz and Prowl had agreed readily enough. "Polyhex is my home," Jazz said firmly. "And I wanna beat the absolute slag out of any Decepticreep who thinks they can yank us around. Besides, how better to protect you than to figure out how to get you out of there if things

go sideways?"

"I'd prefer to keep both of you here," Prowl said. "But I would not succeed, and you are correct. This is important. And it is important that all of Cybertron sees Megatron fighting on the front lines, to protect the mecha just like them. I'm also sending Ironhide as a bodyguard."

"I do not need a bodyguard," Megatron said but Prowl wouldn't budge and Ironhide thought it was funny and was exchanging horrendously dirty jokes with Impactor before the shuttle, a new recruit by the name of Skyfire, was even off the ground. Megatron ended up making his way forward to the cockpit before Jazz could join in, and there he found that Skyfire, like him, had also ventured into academia despite having an unapproved alt for the purpose. The two of them spent most of the flight amiably swapping stories of academic atrocities—Megatron might have gone to a medical academy while Skyfire had entered a scientific institute, but their experiences had strongly paralleled one another, even if Skyfire had completed his degree long before Megatron had enrolled. Ratchet had been a significant advocate for Skyfire's case, back when it had been safer.

After a little, Ultra Magnus came up to join them and listened quietly, his frown growing deeper with every tale. Megatron didn't know the mech well, but he wanted it clear to every Autobot that Functionist doctrine was going to be left well in the past, so when Magnus said, "Those were appalling breaches of procedure. Originally, they were supposed to keep mecha safe; that they were abused to exclude people is unforgivable," he counted it as a job well done.

Back in the crew compartment, someone made a creative rude noise, received with gales of laughter.

"My sentiments exactly," said Skyfire, deadpan. It was unclear whether he was responding to Magnus's comment or to the rude noise. Megatron found himself smiling.

Magnus was watching him with the careful neutrality of a soldier or miner. Megatron watched him in return, certain a careful evaluation was going on under the expressionless gaze. He knew Magnus only by reputation; a powerhouse of a mech, a military officer like Thunderclash who'd quickly pledged his services to the Autobots. They'd not had much contact yet, but Tyrest and Prowl certainly spoke highly of him.

Jazz came up to the cockpit and stopped in the door; Megatron and Magnus were big mecha and filled it to capacity. "We're five minutes out from the drop zone," he said. "Rest of our support is thirty minutes back. So we've got that long before Prowl decides playtime's over and pulls us back in. You want to make a speech, Megatron?"

"A good idea," said Megatron, getting up, and brushed Jazz's shoulder with a hand as they maneuvered in the tight space, keeping it discreet. It wasn't like it was a secret, but it was simpler that way.

They moved out into the main cabin. Megatron was gratified by the way that everyone fell silent, aided in no small part by Impactor's quelling gestures and at one point, a sharp jab of his harpoon. He looked around. "Most of the time, there's a stern speech about objectives for a mission," he said. "The one serious one we have—rescue all the civilians we can and get them back to Iacon. No civilian casualties, do you understand me?"

They all nodded seriously.

"Otherwise, we're here to be heroes and to steal anything that isn't nailed down. It doesn't count as nailed down if you can pry it up. Every last mech we can get away from the Decepticons, every bit of scrap metal, is one step further to stopping the Decepticons in their tracks."

"Frag yeah let's kick 'con aft!" roared Impactor. "Wreck'n'rule!"

"I see they already have a slogan," murmured Ultra Magnus, sounding tired just at the thought of it, but then Skyfire's doors opened and the roar of battle swallowed everything else.

Starscream bit his lip, rolling his hips over Optimus's spike. Optimus staring up at him, optics dim with desire, how perfect and heavy his hands were on Starscream's waist, the thick ridged length of him, so big and perfect inside Starscream's valve—no wonder Megatron had thrown himself into berth with the mech so fast.

Well, Optimus was all his now. Megatron would just have to be happy with his fingers and memories. And his regret he hadn't learned to control Optimus better. Starscream fanned his wings out and arched his back to give Optimus a better view.

Optimus's hands tightened on him. His hips surged up, slamming into Starscream's valve, and suddenly he rolled them so Starscream's back hit the berth and his world was filled with Optimus's body over him, hot vents gusting down on him. He yelped with surprise, but any objection he would have voiced was driven from his mind by the surge of charge between his legs. Optimus kept a hand on his hip to steady him, reaching to gather and pin his hands over his head with the other. Starscream moaned, loud and unashamed.

"You like that, don't you," Optimus said, fragging him hard and fluid. Starscream wriggled his hips, nodding frantically. Optimus bent to bite at his neck cables, his movements speeding even more. Starscream's optics went wide as he felt his valve begin to ripple in an overload, leaving him gasping and taut in Optimus's powerful grasp.

Optimus let out a long sigh of satisfaction, fragging him through it until he reached his own peak, staying bent over him. It was cute for a few seconds, but Starscream soon found the confinement irritating and wriggled under him.

Optimus reluctantly moved back. Starscream sat up.

"You're enchanting," Optimus told him, and leaned forward to kiss him, still faintly tasting of Starscream's lubricants. Starscream smirked, pulling away.

"We should have done this ages ago," he said.

"We have time now," said Optimus, smiling. "What do you want to do next?"

Their comms rang in unison. Optimus reached for his, frowning at Starscream batting his own off the berthside table with a hiss.

"What is it, Soundwave?" A pause. "Understood. We're on our way." He cut the connection and tossed a metal mesh cloth at Starscream. "Megatron has attacked the construction site in Polyhex. We're both needed."

"Fragger," said Starscream, frowning deeply. "No respect for my time."

Optimus laughed and pulled him into a kiss.

Skyfire put them down in an industrial area, some distance from the Decepticon activity. They crept up on the construction site from the east. Even though no one else really had stealth mods as good as Jazz's, there was enough noise they didn't really have to worry about being

spotted early. Megatron poked his head over the corner of their shelter, a retaining wall around the roof of a one-story building overlooking the site, made a face, and withdrew it. "You know, I wish we'd been wrong about the Decepticons disenfranchising civilians in order to enslave them."

"Don't you just love it when the enemy plays into your propaganda?" Jazz said, with something far too mean to be a smile.

"If we ever needed proof that the Decepticons were coopted by the very military and police powers they were claiming to rebel against, it's that," said Megatron. "It stops now."

He got up and vaulted the wall, rolling to absorb his momentum and popping to his feet with the last of it. It was a trick Jazz had taught him, and it felt good to feel all of his frame responding fluidly. His back, new metals making shiny scars where Tarn had beaten him, only pulled a little.

Next to where he'd landed, a mech holding a plasma whip gaped. The smaller, collared mech at his pedes, his back already gouged and burned, cringed.

"That was a mistake," Megatron told the whip-wielder, pleasantly enough, seized his arm in both hands, planted a pede in his midsection, and tore his arm off. He crushed the whip for good measure. "You are a traitor to our species," he said. "Cybertronians were not made to *kneel*."

The mech, wisely enough, stayed down sobbing. Megatron looked up. There were a lot of mecha restrained with collars, and significantly fewer mecha with weapons, mostly whips. "We are liberating this facility," he said. "Decepticons, drop your weapons or die."

They did not drop their weapons.

Megatron charged into the fight with a roar of delight, sending them flying and the few who managed to keep their feet calling frantically for backup. Frag restraint, frag being the bigger mech—there was a satisfaction to catching someone in the act of cruelty and just *hurting*, especially if you'd warned them and they were stupid enough to try and fight you.

One fragger tried to tackle him to the ground and get his arms behind his back, but Jazz was there in a moment and his blade went right through the mech and into the ground next to Megatron's cheek, so it didn't go well for him. Megatron returned the favor by blasting a hole the size of his arm through the chest of a Decepticon lining up to shoot Jazz thorough the helm.

"I got your back, mech," Jazz said.

"I've got yours," said Megatron, and they shared an embarrassingly soppy smile before going back to the fighting. Sooner rather than later he found himself subspacing his ion cannon and laying about him with the axe, because the reinforcements had arrived and there were a lot of the fraggers around, and then he spotted a mech grabbing one of the collared mecha—a lithe blue person, who struggled and babbled curses at an incredible rate—and realized they were going to try to kill the prisoners while he and Jazz were pinned down by their companions.

"Jazz," he said. "I think I can throw you."

"What the frag," said Jazz, stabbing someone through the eye.

"They'll try to kill the prisoners," said Megatron. "I'm going to throw you so you can rescue them."

"That's a terrible idea and I love it," said Jazz, and was less thrown than used Megatron as a

springboard to launch himself over the heads of their attackers. Megatron wasn't going to let him have all the fun, but he bulled *through* them instead, and let Impactor and Whirl, who'd come up from the side, keep them off his back as he grabbed the first hostage taker by the throat and closed his hand hard.

The Decepticon dropped the little blue mech, and Megatron ended up standing over him and fending off the next wave of them while the mech clung, very unhelpfully, to his leg. From the roaring laughter somewhere in the mob, he knew Impactor was in there too, but it was a good hard fight and a massive relief. He could see Ultra Magnus's helm and shoulders over the press of frames, his mouth downturned in disapproval as he dispatched his opponents with a professional efficiency, making it look like an unpleasant tidying job rather than a fight.

The roar of shuttle engines approached. It hadn't seemed like forty minutes. "Prowl's interrupting," Megatron complained aloud to Jazz.

"When doesn't he," said Jazz.

"Decepticon reinforcements inbound!" yelled Magnus from the edge of the fight. "Wreckers, form a perimeter around the Prime. We cannot let—"

But Megatron had already seen Optimus, poised on a rooftop as if he didn't care. He snarled and pulled out his ion cannon. Optimus had twisted his words to justify this, taken his writings and spoken eloquently about the rights of all sentient beings without ever once examining what he'd learned to do as an Enforcer; to keep mecha down and useful, to view any dissent, any criticism, as an existential threat to the society from which he so directly benefitted. He'd taken liberty and substituted tyranny in its place and still called it liberty.

Megatron wasn't going to bother with a challenge. He shot at the mech.

Optimus dodged and threw himself down off the roof at Megatron's second shot, making right for him. Megatron stuffed the cannon away and drew his axe, charging at Optimus, tearing past Magnus as the mech fought his way back to Megatron's position, utterly focused on the cowardly, arrogant fragger in front of him.

"—can't let him do exactly that," he heard Magnus finish, in tones of resignation.

He'd let Optimus live once, to save Ratchet. Jazz was right. Optimus wasn't as important as Ratchet. This was about protecting and remaking Cybertron, and Optimus had no idea of the world Megatron fought for.

Right now, there was no Ratchet to protect. Megatron could try and make things right.

"You called my fears of enslavement hyperbole!" He struck at Optimus's helm. When Optimus blocked him, Megatron stepped in close and slammed his pede down on the top of Optimus's.

Optimus huffed with pain and pulled away, swinging for Megatron with his morningstar as he did. Megatron stayed with him, staying in close at hand-to-hand range, the best way to nullify the power of Optimus's fusion cannon and stop him from turning it on the other Autobots.

"You called my fears stupid, and look at what you did the *instant* you had a fragging chance!" Megatron yelled.

"They're *criminals*," Optimus gritted. "Terrorists!"

"Do you hear that?" Megatron was glad his voice could carry so well over the roar of battle. "Lord Optimus of the Decepticons is *so afraid* of your voices that he calls you terrorists for *using them!* What *cowardice!*"

Optimus backhanded him. Megatron spat energon into his face, spattering it over his facemask and optics and slammed his helm into Optimus's with a force that made his vision fritz. He clawed a hand in under Optimus's arm as the mech raised the morningstar, aiming for the hydraulics there. Optimus hissed in pain and brought the mace down on Megatron's shoulder anyway. Megatron used the moments before the pain hit to rip a chunk out of the workings of Optimus's arm, and saw with satisfaction Optimus's hand spasm and the morningstar fall to the ground at the same time a sense of numbness and growing aching pain in his shoulder let him know that the impact of that blow had done serious damage. He switched the axe to the other hand. "Freedom is the right of all sentient beings," he said. "There's no exceptions for convenience, Optimus."

"All sentient beings deserve peace and security," said Optimus. "Things the Decepticons alone offer—"

"Oh, shut up," said Megatron. "At least until you can put two words together without betraying the depths of your delusions."

"I am not the one who had deluded himself!" Optimus attacked again. Megatron blocked him, straining.

"There have been things like you before," he said, hearing a new resonance in his voice and realizing it was, in part, the Matrix. "And they do not last."

Optimus's optics widened. He brought a foot up and kicked Megatron away. Megatron staggered and fell back, rolling to protect his damaged shoulder. He expected Optimus to come after him, but he didn't, too occupied with calling a retreat.

Prowl's reinforcements had arrived.

"Had fun, did you?" Jazz asked, once the Decepticons had fled. He looked down at Megatron, blaster held up and easy against his shoulder, and offered him a hand. "You *know* this is why Prowl ends the fun early."

Megatron shrugged, as best he could with one shoulder. "It keeps him out of the way of the rest of you."

"And that would be why none of us tried to stop you," said Jazz, amused. "All right, big guy. Let's get this place looted and head for home."

"Shockwave," said Starscream, sauntering past the various *do not enter*, *protective equipment required*, *training in level 5 hazardous substances required*, and *danger* signs into the lab, "I have an engaging project for you."

Shockwave straightened up, banishing the contents of the screen of his workstation before Starscream could glimpse more of it than something about "ores". "What is it?"

"Cloning," said Starscream. "It's theoretically possible, isn't it?"

"Yes. Who do you wish to clone?"

Starscream folded his hands behind his back, pacing like a drill instructor lecturing a recruit. "I've already familiarized you with the concept of the Phase Six project—thank you for agreeing to that, by the way—but I have an idea for one of the ah... participants."

"Go on."

"I was thinking...a psychological component."

"Like Tarn."

Starscream nodded. "Exactly. Bringing back a figure from the Prime's past—*fully* under our control, of course. Clone him. We'd need a Point One Percenter spark, of course, but there are ways to get those."

Shockwave just stared at him with the single optic.

"Your technology for keeping the Phase Six subjects in line is promising. You'll want to make a more... robust version of it for this one. Do it first, be sure it'll work. You need prisoners to figure it out on, let me know and they'll be provided without question. But this..." Starscream produced a vial from his subspace. It had a finger, large and gray with death, the frayed pieces hanging out of it desiccated. Shockwave made no move to take it.

"I want you to clone that mech—if, and only if, you can make sure he'll stay under control," said Starscream. "And I want you to make him a Phase Sixer."

Shockwave took the vial slowly, tipped the finger out onto a sensor plate. It whirred as it scanned, and he tilted his head up to look at the display above him as the mech's designation flashed there. "Optimus also has history with this individual."

"Optimus will understand," Starscream said. "Especially if we're utterly sure he's under our control, which I leave in your capable...hand."

"Why?"

"I don't just want to fight Megatron with weapons," Starscream said. "I want to target him. Who he is. And I want to use the worst parts of his past to do that. The Autobots love him, Shockwave. We turn that against them. We take him away from them."

Shockwave still gazed steadily up at the screen. "It...seems logical," he said at last. "As well as an intriguing problem. The requisition for prisoners and materials will be sent shortly."

"That's all I could ask," Starscream said. His comm pinged. "And speak of Mortilis, looks like I've got an afteraction debriefing on the Autobot raid on Polyhex. I look forward to your thoughts, Shockwave."

He turned on his heel and strode from the room, trying to seem unaffected, but his wings tightened against his back, the gaze of the long-dead mech staring back at them from the viewscreen like a physical weight between them. He didn't care how unsavory that individual had been in life. Megatron had interfered with him one too many times, and it was well past time the mech paid for it.

He paused briefly in the door, confirming that Shockwave's attention was fixed on the finger before him, and glared back at the image. It was the standard identifying picture all Cybertronians online under the Functionists had, but the mech seemed both cruel and smug.

You're Optimus and Megatron's nightmare, not mine, he thought at the picture of Overlord.
You'll be my weapon.

Chapter 109

"...and then Starscream and Skyfire saw each other and got...extremely nasty," said Jazz. "Nastier than Megatron and Optimus, actually. Apparently knew each other at the science academy."

"And Megatron and Optimus tried to rip each other's arms off," said Prowl, with a heavy sigh. Megatron, sitting across from them with the affected arm in a sling to prevent him from moving it while the epoxy holding the dressing on cured, looked completely unrepentant.

"It's a simple surgery," he said. "The only reason I'm in this contraption is First Aid can't get to me until he finishes up with the three casualties more urgent than I am. And no one said I could only fight if I didn't get hurt."

"He reliably distracts Optimus," Jazz said hurriedly, before Prowl could say anything. Prowl frowned at him. "You know the havoc that Optimus can wreak on our lines otherwise. He's big and he's good at what he does and he has that fragging cannon."

Prowl frowned and steepled his fingers, watching the two of them squirm like bad sparklings.

"I tried to form a perimeter to protect him," said Ultra Magnus, sounding put out.

"I don't think falling back and being protected by the Wreckers every time Optimus—or any other Decepticon heavyweight—shows up is going to inspire *anyone*," said Megatron, annoyed. "The mecha out there are scared. The few people who haven't chosen a side are focused on surviving. The Autobot rank and file know we're losing. They need to know we'll fight for them. They need to know that we'll come to save them. And that none of us are afraid."

There was a brief silence after that, and as much as Prowl hated to admit it, Megatron was right. This war had become about morale as well as simple military success. And the Autobots were planning to retreat. Morale was hard to maintain under those circumstances. So instead of directly acknowledging Megatron's victory, Prowl said, "Very well. Become better at not getting hurt. Next order of business?"

"Related to the retreat," said Megatron. "I will not leave until everyone else has been evacuated."

That was too much. Prowl gave him a look of complete icy disapproval. "Explain your logic."

Megatron didn't quail. "Optimus would expect me to be in the forefront of any exodus. He'd expect me to be focused on saving my own plating. My presence will make him doubt the intelligence reports about what we're actually doing. As we just discussed, I'm an effective distraction, and that has significant tactical value. There's also the effect on morale, which can't be discounted. And..." He looked away, shoulders hunching, and Prowl folded his arms, bracing for some stunning leap of heroic illogic.

"I am Prime," Megatron said simply. "That comes with a responsibility to our people. If we're going into exile for the sake of survival, it is my duty to ensure all Cybertronians who wish to escape the Decepticons do so, before I ensure my own safety. I know all of you think me irreplaceable," his gaze swept over all of them, and Prowl felt his doorwings try to fold into a

position of respectful acknowledgement, which was totally inappropriate because this was his commander trying to put himself into a vulnerable position because of an outdated sense of noblesse oblige, ignoring all practicality, "but that is not the case. Not only will the line of Primes continue after me, but the mecha around this table are more than capable of carrying on our work. As Prowl and Jazz have made more than clear to me, we are mecha first, driven by conscience and our cause, and I am not the only mech here capable of leadership. It doesn't only matter whether we win this war. It matters that we can live with ourselves afterward. It matters that, even in the midst of horror, we can show the world that there is something worth aspiring to. That we have other choices between Functionist atrocity and Decepticon injustice. I'm staying, because I won't leave the last of us to struggle on Cybertron, wondering if they've been abandoned on a world held by their enemies because it was strategically sound that the Prime be evacuated early."

Prowl ground his dentae. It was heroic nonsense. Even before you factored in that this was one of the mecha he loved declaring his life useless in the face of the PR advantage staying would grant them. But it was also heroic nonsense he couldn't rebut in any meaningful way, because Megatron wasn't wrong for the very same reasons he and Jazz hadn't been wrong to encourage Megatron to save Ratchet.

"Very well," he said. "We will operate under those assumptions, but I reserve the right to revisit the issue at a later date."

Across the table, Jazz was giving him a look of enormous amusement. Prowl shot him a frown as well. If Megatron was going to insist on staying to the bitter end, he would as well. Maybe having to account for the safety of his partners—unlikely that Jazz would leave the two of them, after all—would make the mech have a care about his own function.

"Can you believe it?" Ratchet said. "Now he's down an arm."

Drift tried not to laugh. Ratchet's rage was way less scary when the mech was confined to berth—and not aiming it at him. "He fought Optimus one on one," he said aloud. "That's something of a feat."

"Yeah, and there are *much* better things to do than fight that waste of spark one on one. Idiot," said Ratchet, shaking his head. Then he turned over to look at Drift. "Why *are* you here, anyway, kid?"

"Because Optimus wanted you kidnapped for Pharma," Drift said, seeing no point in sweetening the news. He felt bad when he saw all the liveliness drain from Ratchet's face, a haunted, hunted look coming into his optics. It was the sort of look you saw on Dead End paybots. He hadn't expected to see it on the face of a medic, someone important, like Ratchet. But it also seemed pretty at home, familiar there. Ratchet had been scared a long time. He looked down at the hands in his lap. "Sorry, doc. But that's why I left. Didn't seem like Optimus and reality were on real good terms anymore, and besides, if we weren't trying to protect people what the frag was the point anymore?"

Ratchet snorted. "Took you a while to figure that out, huh?"

Drift kept looking down. "Yeah. Yeah I guess it did."

"Hey. Kid." Ratchet leaned over toward him. "You still did good. Welcome to the Autobots."

Drift looked up, feeling a glow of happiness in his spark. He didn't want Ratchet to know

how much his approval mattered.

Megatron sent Arcee a ping later that afternoon. She'd been helpful before where the Matrix was concerned, and he was still unsettled about the dream. Rung didn't seem likely to be able to help the same way, since the Matrix was the obvious culprit, and Megatron wasn't entirely sure that even Rung's absolute calm assurance could order the thing to behave.

He had just sat down with a cube of fuel when Arcee slid into the spot across from him, frowning.

"So you're having trouble with the Matrix," she said, with at least enough grace to keep her voice low. "What's it doing?"

Megatron frowned at her. "I'm not entirely sure. It's displeased." He looked around at the room. "Not sure it's a good idea to have it be public knowledge that the Matrix and I aren't on good terms.

"This have anything to do with Ratchet? It doesn't like it when you save someone instead of fighting its enemies."

"That would more or less summarize the issue," said Megatron, and took a long drink of the fuel, watching her frown as well.

"It does so like to give you nightmares," she said.

"Also true." He hesitated. But Trepan's voice, which he'd been able to banish in battle, arose in his mind once more, and he had to ask. "It showed me someone dead," he said. "And I think he told me things that I didn't, couldn't know, things I'm not sure that anyone else would have known."

"It has a connection to the Allspark," said Arcee. "It's a repository of knowledge. So it's got sources, and not just the Primes whose sparks have left impressions on *it*."

He went cold. His hand trembled on the cube of fuel and he put it down quickly so no one would see his fear reflected in the ripples across the surface. He felt, once again, a ghost of the rot of Tarn's spark. The whisper of Terminus's possessiveness, assurance he knew what was right for Megatron, twined inextricably with what Trepan's mutilation had done to him, the one melting into the other.

Trepan—something of Trepan—had touched his spark as well, and not just through Terminus.

"How do I stop it," he said, his inflection all wrong, not even a question. His tank churned with nausea. His spark felt filthy. He realized, abruptly, at some point he might share his spark with Prowl and Jazz, that it was an intimacy they definitely had shared, and while he wanted to be with them in every way he could, he didn't want to besmirch them with what had been done to him. He didn't want to give the Matrix access to them.

He was deeply afraid in that moment. It took away every gain he'd made, every way Jazz and Prowl made him feel he mattered for who, not what he was. He'd accepted this fragging thing and he'd lost parts of himself in ways he hadn't imagined possible.

Arcee rapped her knuckles hard against his arm, startling him. "It's old. It's intelligent," she said. "But it is not your master. Remind it of that. It's angry, in part, that you did remind it of that. There's not been a true Prime in a long time; it's been alone all that while. Before that, it bonded to

some very bad mecha—people who are good at leading others aren't always good people. And while it's its own entity, every Prime who's carried it has left their mark. Changed it, as you have.

"It's old. It doesn't take to new ideas easily. Most mecha think that the Prime's job is to lead the people with the wisdom of the Matrix. But it's also to change the Matrix to fit the people."

"It's slow to accept change but it accepted a miner, a disposable, as Prime," Megatron said. He hated the idea that the thing around his spark might see him as just that—disposable. Cheaply made to be sacrificed.

Arcee gave him a faintly amused smile. "I forget how young the rest of you are sometimes," she said. "*Functionism* is a new idea to it, Megatron. It still remembers a time when we had far, far worse problems than what we could do to each other. It made you into a warframe when you Ascended—when you really Ascended, not when they had that stupid ceremony for you. That wasn't just because it expected you to fight the Functionists. It's because the times our leaders could afford to be anything but our armed protectors have been fewer than even our long history remembers."

She sobered again. "It's forged a strong bond with you," she said. "It's good and bad. You've seen how punitive it can be. But it means you can change it in equal measure. So bend you will to that. It sounds as if so far *it* has been communing with you, when it feels like it. It's time for you to commune with it. For *you* to change *it*. Otherwise it will continue to parade the memories of the dead across your nightmares." She rose. "What makes a Prime isn't whether the Matrix judges you worthy. It's whether you can bear it, over years or millennia. It's whether you can make it better."

With that, she left. Megatron stared into his fuel, his appetite gone. The war was dire enough; the threat of Optimus and the Decepticons murdering with his words stolen on their lips enraging and nauseating. But this battle within himself was a thousand times more frightening.

He forced himself to drink his fuel, because he could not bear to waste it, but he imagined the taste of innermost energon too strongly to enjoy it.

Chapter 110

First Aid repaired the broken shoulder strut that evening, *tsking* over the damage. "Primus," he said. "It's like someone dropped an industrial assembly arm on this."

"Worse," said Megatron, who'd elected to stay conscious thanks to the really excellent painblockers they were testing—SpecOps wanted them for their agents for self-repair in the field, the medical corps wanted them for self-repair for medics injured in the course of their duties on the front lines, and the Wreckers were clamoring for them as well, though that might have been just as much for their homicidal games of lob as for actual wartime applications. "Believe me."

"Ugh. Metaphors never work on you," First Aid said. "You've got too much practical experience. I'm scared to compare anything to what a sparkeater might have done, because for all I know you've encountered a real one somewhere under some alien planet. All right, closing up. Yell if you want any last minute mods while Ratchet can't stop us."

Megatron snorted. "I'll survive, thanks."

"What are you doing after this?" First Aid asked, and then laughed aloud at the frozen startled look Megatron gave him. "Ah. I'll inquire no further. But once Ratchet's back on his feet, we should take some time to hang out that's not work."

Megatron wondered, briefly, how it was so obvious he planned to go find Jazz and Prowl and see if they could be persuaded to distract him from the problems of the Matrix for a few hours, but unfair intuition was one of First Aid's strong suits, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to ask further. "When can I go back to sparring?" he asked instead.

"Keep it slow and don't make any sudden movements with force behind them," First Aid said. "I think my patch job should hold up anyway, but you'll be sore if you're incautious. Make sure any position you plan on holding for a long time is a comfortable one, and make sure to take the time to readjust if you feel any discomfort in the area."

Sparring didn't generally involve holding positions for long periods of time. Megatron frowned at First Aid, who stared back at him blandly. It wasn't entirely fair; the faceplate covered most of his expression.

"All right, you're ready to go," he said, patting Megatron on the other shoulder. Megatron got to his pedes and headed for the door. It was just closing behind him when he heard First Aid say cheerfully, "And have fun!"

First Aid's prying had not at all dissuaded Megatron from going looking for Prowl, who he knew was off duty around the same time he was. Jazz, unfortunately, had a slightly longer shift, but the disjunct was only about half an hour. Megatron had ideas about what could be done with that; he hoped the two of them would be interested.

Prowl was still in his office when he came in and frowned delicately at him. Megatron settled down in one of the chairs in front of the desk. "I take it you remain unhappy with my long term intentions," he said.

"Yes, and I've yet to find an argument against them," said Prowl.

"Glad to hear it." He gave Prowl a gently teasing smile. "I believe you're off duty now."

Prowl didn't look particularly impressed.

"Perhaps there's something better we could be doing with the time?" Megatron offered.
"Perhaps concocting a surprise for Jazz?"

Prowl's expression went from unimpressed to thoughtful. "I suppose you have something in mind."

Megatron smiled. "I do."

Prowl had hinted when he'd gotten off duty that he and Megatron were plotting something, so Jazz made sure there was no possibility of anyone looking over his shoulder when he opened the encrypted message from Prowl later that night. He was very glad of his paranoia. Because it was a beautiful image of Megatron looking slightly self-conscious, legs spread, and his fingers parting his valve lips. Next to him was Prowl looking absolutely wicked and holding a vibrator.

The text said *hurry up*.

Jazz hurried.

"Oh," Jazz said, impressed, when he stepped into their berthroom. Megatron was on his knees in front of Prowl, shoulders leaned back against the berth and head bent forward, quivering. He was flushed and breathing through his intake, lips slightly parted to show a tantalizing glimpse of glossa and the darker metalmesh of the inside of his intake. Prowl had used the red metalmesh rope to bind his arms carefully behind his back, and Megatron was wearing the heavy red collar with the silver ring at the front that looked just as good on his gray plating as it did against black and white. Prowl had one finger hooked in that ring, pulling Megatron's head down a little so he could watch Prowl applying the vibrator to his node. From the strong smell of lubricant, Megatron had already overloaded at least once. Probably more, if Jazz knew his mate.

Prowl looked up at Jazz and smiled slowly. He released his hold on Megatron's collar so he could look up and see Jazz, thumbed the intensity on the vibrator up and said, "Here he is, Megatron. Are you all ready to be used, as you asked to be?"

Megatron looked up at Jazz and overloaded with a strangled shout, which was incredibly flattering even if Jazz had seen Prowl press the vibrator's tip more firmly against his node just then.

Prowl stood and set the vibrator aside, patting Megatron's shoulder reassuringly as he did. Megatron was still panting and shivering with the aftershocks, but looked up and gave Jazz a little smile once he stopped shaking enough.

"All for me?" said Jazz, as Prowl walked up to him and kissed him. He tasted a little of Megatron.

"All for you," said Prowl, smug. "Unless you're inclined to share."

Jazz dropped both hands to his partner's aft and squeezed. "With you, darling? Always. Now, what to do with our pet here?"

Megatron's engine revved. So he liked that. Jazz grinned and sauntered over to him.

"Hm. Prowl looks happy. I take it you've been very good." Megatron worried his bottom lip in response, squirming a little under his scrutiny. His knees inched further apart, hips canting forward in clear invitation.

Jazz looked at Prowl. "Any preferences?"

Prowl gave him a long slow smile. "Play with him however you'd like. I'm happy to watch."

"I got some ideas," said Jazz with a grin. He flopped in a chair a little way from the berth and spread his legs wide. "Come here, pet."

Megatron obeyed, optics overbright with arousal, and he hitched a little gasp when Jazz hooked a finger in the ring of the collar and pulled him in.

"Pretty," he said, making a show of examining him, arms bound at the small of his back, his entire frame arching forward in clear invitation. He was already embarrassingly hard behind his panel, thinking about how Megatron would look, would feel, squirming under him, legs spread and that neat wet valve on full display, trembling as he looked at it.

But he had other ideas first. Mostly to do with all the incredible things Megatron was good at with that pretty glossa. He traced a finger over Megatron's lips, pressing to make them part a little. Leaned in, enjoying the way Megatron's vents hitched, his optics wide and bright. Kissed him.

Oh Primus, was the mech a good kisser. Megatron's mouth opened willingly to him, yielding and happy. Megatron moaned a little into the kiss, letting his weight fall a little more into Jazz's hands. Totally, willingly, adoringly at Jazz's mercy.

He pulled back a little, composing himself with an effort, and let go, letting Megatron fall to his knees with a thump. He hooked the collar again, making no effort to be gentle, and pulled Megatron in between his legs.

"All right pretty," he said, popping his panel and letting his spike pressurize, "how about you show me how much you want this?"

Megatron moaned eagerly and leaned forward to take Jazz in his mouth, sucking with more enthusiasm than skill. All the same, it took conscious effort for Jazz to keep staring down at him, pretending to be unimpressed. He flicked a glance at Prowl. "Prowl. You wanna have a little fun first?"

Prowl had already had some fun with Megatron, that much was evident, but his engine revved hard at the suggestion and he circled around, eyeing them.

"Perhaps," he said, coming to a halt behind Megatron, and put an assured hand on the small of his back, petting with a gentleness that belied his tone.

"Show off your ports for Prowl, sweet," Jazz said. "You must be all nice and wet for him by now, right?"

Megatron made a small whimpering noise.

"I'm not sure he's earned anything in his valve yet," said Prowl. He reached down and rubbed a thumb over Megatron's diagnostic port. "Though he might be charged enough to overload from taking it here."

"Yeah I don't think he's gonna be picky right now," said Jazz, leaning back and pulling Megatron off balance with him. "Up to you how you want to frag him. Whatever you do, he'll like it. Won't you?"

Megatron bobbed his helm, trying to swallow Jazz down, optics pleading. Jazz chuckled. "Yeah, you will."

Megatron tensed and went still as Prowl slid a lubricant slick finger into him. Jazz tugged a little on his collar. "You got a job to do here pet. Don't get distracted."

Megatron whined a little, but sped his movements. Jazz split his attention between his spike vanishing into Megatron's intake, the feeling of soft slick glossa on him, the nudge of his spike against the back of Megatron's throat, hot and yielding, and the sight of Prowl working Megatron's tight little port open. Okay, Prowl had given him a quick idea of what he and Megatron had had planned for his approval, but it was one thing to imagine it and another to have it realized. Jazz loved being fragged into a screaming, keening mess by Prowl but it was so much fun collaborating with him to do it to another mech.

Prowl withdrew his fingers, making optic contact with Jazz as he turned them so they glistened in the light, then opened his panels and pressurized his spike. He reached for the lubricant again, slicking himself thoroughly with a sigh of approval. Megatron tried to look at him, to see what Prowl intended for him, but Jazz patted his cheek firmly. "No. Stay on task, pet."

All the same, Megatron whimpered when Prowl rubbed the slick head of his spike against his aft, and whimpered again, squirming, when Prowl seized his hips and held him firm, pushing slowly in. His mouth slackened around Jazz, his optics widening, as Prowl steadily filled him.

It was honestly pretty good timing. Jazz wasn't sure if he had enough energy to go for more than one round tonight, and he was getting pretty close. He pulled out of Megatron's mouth and tilted his chin up instead. "Look at me while he takes you," he said. "I want to see your face."

Megatron bit his lip with a sound of desperate arousal, an expression miles away from the calm determination he wore at the strategy table, the feeling he projected in battle like he was the anchor of the world, that he alone would make everything all right. Here, he was just another mech—though *just* was doing it a discourtesy. He was a mech, a good determined mech giving everything he was to make a better life for his entire species, and here he could show it without shame. Here he could need, like anyone else. Here, he could give in and have someone else make the decisions, and break himself down into sensations and desires and the desperate need to have someone assure him it would all be all right. He watched Jazz like Jazz was for once his anchor, and Jazz loved him dearly for that trust. He could feel Prowl's optics on them both, that familiar treasuring gaze, as his hips worked and he chased his overload inside Megatron, using Megatron as Megatron desperately needed, to be able to be of service in a way that required no hideous sacrifice, in a way that brought only pleasure.

"Should I overload in him?" Prowl asked, conversationally. "Or do you have further plans?"

"No further plans, but it would be fun to watch you mark him," said Jazz. "Get that shiny pert aft a little dirty. Let him know we've got him." Megatron made a choked noise at that and twitched back onto Prowl's spike. Prowl's vents hiccuped and he withdrew abruptly, fisting his spike and overloading in stripes over Megatron's aft. Jazz watched them both greedily. He'd never tire of Prowl in overload, his mouth open and his optics brilliant, his frame a stiff arc of pleasure.

Megatron hadn't overloaded yet, gasping and desperately stricken with need, his whole frame trembling. Jazz watched him with delight a few seconds, nudged him out of his lap and

stood. "Keep leaning on that chair, sweetspark," he said. Megatron obeyed, kneeling with his transfluid-marked aft on full display, Prowl's spill gleaming on the black paint and his valve trembling desperately. Jazz didn't touch him immediately, looking at the flutter and clench of him instead, the way his hips worked and his frame shuddered.

"Prowl, do you think he's revved up enough for the spike sleeve?" Jazz asked, thoughtfully. He loved the idea of overloading in Megatron's hot desperate valve, but he also loved the idea of stretching him to his limits, watching him squirm as he drove the massive girth into him. It would be a good reward for his patience; Jazz fragging loved Prowl's spike, but being stuffed full like that was a real fragging treat, especially knowing Prowl was still chasing his pleasure with it.

"Good idea," said Prowl. "I'll open him up a little, shall I?"

"Please do. Try not to let him overload." Jazz smiled slyly at Prowl. "I want his patience to be *fully* rewarded."

It was a pun hardly deserving of the name but it did make Prowl snort and roll his optics and Megatron dart an amazed, almost outraged look of amusement over his shoulder, briefly rising from his submissive trance. Jazz cackled and went to get the toy, lubricating the hollow for his own spike and sliding into the space designed to be a snug replica of a real valve. He used the lubricant to slick the length, twitching his hips to frag a little into its snugness as he watched Prowl open Megatron up even more. He added a little more lubricant as an afterthought.

"Should we let him see what he's gonna take?" he asked Prowl. "Or should he just feel it?"

Prowl checked Megatron's face before responding. "He should just take it. After all, it's his job to make sure we have fun."

Megatron's aroused whimper made it clear that was a good idea. Prowl slid his fingers from Megatron's valve, chuckling as Megatron tried to follow them. He patted Megatron's aft. "You'll get what you want soon enough."

Jazz stepped up, snagging Prowl and pulling him into a kiss first, then rubbing a firm hand over Megatron's aft. "You're going to sing real pretty for us," he promised, and bumped the head of the toy firmly against the entrance of Megatron's valve. Megatron had his head turned a little, his cheek pressed into the upholstery of the chair, and his one visible optic went wide.

Jazz rubbed against his valve a little, fingering his slowly relaxing port as he did. Then he put a hand on Megatron's hip and grabbed the false spike just below the head and started pushing in.

Megatron made a stifled noise but took it way more easily than Jazz ever had. Jazz watched his valve stretch around the intrusion, red biolights showing around his valve lips. The spike sleeve came to life, transmitting a close approximation of the heat and the rippling of Megatron's valve to Jazz's spike, and Jazz groaned aloud. He pushed in long and firm. Megatron cried out, vents hiccupping.

"That's it," Jazz said, soothing. "That's all of it. How's it feel, mech?"

"So good. Please," whispered Megatron, and pressed his hips back. Jazz grinned and started fragging him the way he wanted to, deep and firm, pressing his spike in hard, listening to him go from soft noises to steady low cries, a little optical lubricant trickling down his face just before it became too much and he bowed up in an overload, his entire valve clenching hard. Jazz sped up, feeling him start to squirm under him with oversensitivity, his optics and mouth wide and his whole

frame shaking violently. He tipped over hard, watching that. It was impossible not to.

After a few silent panting moments, he slid out and put the spike aside. Prowl helped him untie Megatron's arms while Megatron was still lying there trembling. They waited to remove the collar—Megatron wanted to take it off himself, in case fingers around his neck awakened any bad memories.

When Megatron's vents returned to something like normal and his optics got their focus, Prowl helped him up. "You said you wanted to take your mind off the Matrix," he said. "Did that help?"

Megatron gave him a slightly shaky smile back. "Yes."

Much later, cleaned up and with a pleasant soreness between his legs, Megatron lay with both Jazz and Prowl curled in his lap and smiled at them over his datapad. They weren't very big; the biggest problem in terms of space were their doorwings, twitching as they recharged. He'd had to rearrange them to stop them knocking into each other. Prowl had slept right through it, limp and trusting. Jazz had woken up enough to go "murglemumphs'alright ya do whatever," which meant he'd turned all his stealth protocols off, and Megatron was completely charmed by that trust as well. He'd hesitated before touching Jazz, knowing he had a fairly good chance of getting a knife at his throat, and the fact he hadn't was a huge and bewildering compliment.

He petted Prowl's helm, just to see the flutter of doorwings, and smiled to himself, feeling completely safe in his own right. Safe, and powerful—because just now both of them looked very small and fragile to him. He'd fought with Jazz beside him earlier, known they could fight as a team, knew he could keep him safe. He liked that feeling.

Jazz muttered a little in his sleep and shifted abruptly, turning over to prop his chin on Megatron's chest. Megatron lifted the datapad a little to accommodate him, still smiling.

He leaned back and simply enjoyed feeling happy. There had been far too much grief and rage in the past; this felt good. A balm he hadn't known he needed. He loved these mecha, and they loved him, and right now there was nothing to be afraid of.

There was a soft chuckle from the region of his chestplates. Jazz was looking up at him from a softly lit visor. "Don't think I've ever seen you this relaxed," he said softly. "It's nice."

Megatron smiled at him. "I don't think I've been this relaxed in years," he said.

"What was that you and Prowler were talking about? About the Matrix?"

Some, but not all, of Megatron's good mood evaporated. He frowned pensively down at the datapad. "Arcee tells me I need to take a stronger role with the Matrix," he said. "I need to deliberately commune with it."

"Sounds like fun," said Jazz, sympathetically. "I guess it needs to be taught you're your own person?"

"Yes," said Megatron, and sighed. "I've never thought about my own influence on it," he said. "I've only been afraid of its influence on me."

"Then it's high time you faced it," said Jazz, suddenly totally serious. "We're agreed that that thing doesn't always have the best ideas, and I think it's going to take more than one session to bring it around. I know you're worried about it changing you. But you're good enough at facing

everything else head on. Why not this?"

Megatron swallowed hard and nodded.

"You wanna do it now?" Jazz asked, searching his face. "I can be right here for you. We can even wake Prowl up."

"I don't even know how to do it," said Megatron, hearing the edge of something like fear in his own voice.

"It's so damn noisy about its opinions, I don't think it'll be hard," said Jazz. "Just think something it really hates at it; that should get a rise out of it."

Prowl had roused sometime during their conversation and was following it with sleepy, thoughtful optics. "I'd prefer you not wake up with another nightmare," he said. "If you feel equal to the task."

Megatron vented carefully, realizing that was why he'd broached the subject in the first place. He did want to deal with it. "I think I do," he said. He wasn't sure what to expect. He feared the Matrix would take the opportunity to subsume him entirely and that what would wake up wouldn't be him at all, but from the way Arcee had talked, it seemed that just maybe that wasn't as likely as he'd feared. Still, if something other than him came back, he trusted Jazz and Prowl to put it down—and that they'd bring him back if at all possible. "I think I will."

Jazz and Prowl pressed close to him with silent reassurance, and Megatron took a deep vent, offlined his optics, and began to look for the part of his spark that wasn't his.

Chapter 111

Megatron wasn't entirely aware of when he made contact with the Matrix, but gradually became aware that he felt like he was sinking, slipping between warm layers of sensation and memory. It was akin to what he'd felt when it had first chosen him, comfort and chaos entwined, the joys and heartbreak of an entire species flashing by him, flicking out tendrils now and then to touch.

He closed his optics and let it flow over him. It was far more welcoming than he had expected, like it had been waiting for him. It was hard not to give into that. To assume everything would be all right in the face of that acceptance, but the horror of the dream stayed with him and that, too, had come from the Matrix.

So you have come to me. The voice was all around him even as he knew he lay on the berth with Jazz and Prowl watching him with intent gentle concern. He was aware of sensation separate from reality, like the hazy moments of lucidity in CR, floating in warm green light.

That warm green light overlaid itself on his visual suite, though his optics were offline and shuttered, and slowly the other sensations joined them, the skitter of bubbles over plating, the hum of external systems more felt than heard. It was, he supposed, the closest his memory banks held to an experience like this one. Something between life and death, something not quite real and erased by his waking mind.

"A discussion is overdue," he said, sounding normal to his own audials even though speaking in a CR tank was impossible. "Your behavior has been... unpleasant."

I see.

The world whirled around him, a nauseating lurch, and he was kneeling on the battlefield with Ratchet under his hands, working smoothly to save his life with very little of his own mind occupied. It was so easy.

Is this what you believe you're meant for? the Matrix asked, falsely reasonable.

"It is what I want," Megatron replied. "I may not have it for a long, long time. But it is what I have always wanted."

He was ripped away from it almost as soon as he'd finished speaking, dashed back onto his knees in Ratchet's clinic. The pain wasn't there this time as claws erupted from his hands, as his dentae grew and his optics went from blue to red, his plating bulking out.

You are wrong. You were not meant for compassion, it told him.

"That's Functionist shuttlescrap and you know it," snapped Megatron. "Arcee, at least, thought you were too old to be fooled by that drivel; it's a pity she was wrong."

It laughed at him. *Not because of your construction,* it told him. *Because of who you are.*

It brought him up short, even before it gave him the memory of killing Overlord, of the horror and then the deep terrible satisfaction in the mech's death.

Because of what you are. He looked down into the faces of the crowd again, newly painted and with the Functionists' false speech in his taloned hand.

You are Prime. If Primus is a warrior god, it is because so many people wish to kill His children. And you are His hand in this world.

You know in your spark you're not like him. Ratchet, cursing as he worked over a patient whose frame juddered and twitched. That you love him so dearly is one thing; but why do you seek to emulate him? Your nature and his are fundamentally different. The Decepticon fell beneath Megatron's blaster. You will only disappoint him.

"He makes me a better person," Megatron said, though he ached with remembered shame, the sensor ghost of wiping away his own insignia.

He doesn't make you the person Cybertron needs. They need a warrior. A protector.

"And you're the one who gets to decide what a protector is, are you?" Megatron asked.

You are made for war, deep at the spark of you. You have always wanted power, do not deny it, and revenge too. There is something deep and cruel in you. You can't outrun it. You cannot ignore it.

"I choose not to act on it. That's different."

Except when it can protect your people.

"Yes."

That is what I wanted to ask of you, the Matrix said. That is why I chose you. So you could turn that rage into protection. And instead you chose this.

He was back on the battlefield with his hands in Ratchet's chassis.

You chose this! It was all but a shriek of rage. You chose to pretend you were something you're not. You are not a healer; you are an avenger, judgement upon the evil, the sins of Cybertron's past incarnate and demanding restitution! And yet you play at being this!

Did you think it would earn you his forgiveness for all the sins you will commit for your people? Did you think for one moment you will live a life where he will never once look at you with disappointment, with sparkbreak? Do you think you can use him to escape what you are?

You are not the mech he thinks you are.

"No one could be," said Megatron. "I do not regret the choices I have made."

Your choices mean our people will die alone in the dark. Cybertron, riven and bleeding fire and energon, hung before them, a last convulsive cataclysm that faded and left a still and silent husk in its wake, glimmering only where starlight struck it, a burned and blighted place. You are a young fool and you know nothing of what war can do. You know nothing of what we can wreak. You know nothing of what will come for us from the sky.

That was a taste of an old horror, a familiar horror, the clamminess of an alien hand on his chin, a long gaze from liquid strange optics and the shameful relief when it turned from him to someone else, but the Matrix seethed with derision at that horror, substituting it for something else, something spark and strut deep, the fear of a clear sky turned against you. The fear of falling up.

You doomed us all. From selfishness. From selfish adoration you doomed your people, Megatron Prime, and you will live with that guilt all your long days, for you will see your error

through!

The words lashed him, and he did feel the guilt it pressed upon him, mixing with his own. He himself knew what he had done. He couldn't truly regret it, but he knew, and it hurt.

It withdrew, then, and sadly, *I should have chosen Orion.*

"Him?" Megatron cried, derisive and stung beyond bearing, angrier still for his knowledge of his own failure. Failure it was, for all his relief he'd not chosen differently. "Him? Look at how *he* fell, given the chance. Look at how he turned against his own people! Look at what he's done with the world, when power came to him!"

Do not speak so lightly and proudly of his fall!

"Having been on the receiving end of his poor decisions, I'll speak of them as I wish," Megatron retorted.

You put yourself above him so easily, the Matrix said. You would have fallen in just such a way had things been but a little difference. No; perhaps you would have been worse. Do not lie. I know your spark. I know who you are, and I know your rage. I know your desperate need for control, how you must at the price of even yourself, win.

I know what you could yet be.

The rage wrapped his spark then, an icy clear madness. He saw his enemies spread before them and he hated them, and worst of all the hatred was so familiar. He knew it so well because he had felt it so many times, only now he could destroy them, he could make those rivers of energon he had promised Optimus, and he did. He did, in all the ways available to him, and when the easy ones were gone he turned his attention to hunting the others, not for necessity—he knew he'd won—but for the pleasure in brutality, for hearing their screams and ending their lives, and the others with him, the mecha at his back, the mecha who loved him, he dragged them with him into base vicious revenge and the satiation of their hatred with horrors. When he came up again, there was nothing left of any of them, only shells with blazing optics all soaked in energon and terrible fluids, all indistinguishable from the dead.

But then he thought of Ratchet, and the rage died an abrupt death. He had not taken that path, and it was unfair of the Matrix to throw it in his face when he'd turned from it of his own accord, when it had been the Matrix urging him toward it. He thought of the frantic seconds—hours, he still didn't really know—of operating on the battlefield, of seeing the alien fuel pump begin to work in Ratchet's viscera, of the hot horribly familiar flash of pain of putting his hand down on the energon fire.

"Yes," he said. "I judge him. Because it was no thanks to you that I *didn't* fall."

That silenced it.

"We will leave this world," he told it. "Optimus can have it. I'm not throwing our people against him in a hopeless battle to retake it. We will have the stars instead, and when the time comes, when Cybertron itself grows restive under the yoke of its new master, we will return."

He thought of the gleaming-flanked ships even now taking shape under the careful hands of Autobot engineers, of the one in Tyger Pax almost ready to launch. He thought of the old outposts, from the days that Cybertron was an empire in something other than name, restored to their former glory. They would have to deal with the aliens, and fairly too, now, and while he was dreadfully

afraid of them he would face that if it meant the Autobots living. They would have a life away from their home, and all the war they fought now was for that life, to get the ships to the stars where they could build. That was worth leaving Cybertron behind, though it would break his own spark to be denied his homeworld, be driven away by the Decepticons as he had by the Functionists. But they would live and they would not lose their sparks in a terrible war from which there would be no victors, only, if they were lucky, survivors.

And if he follows you?

"He will have a hard time of it, if we can fortify our holdings first," said Megatron. "It's better by far than staying here and waiting for him to slaughter us. I won't wish that fate on my Autobots."

The Matrix was silent a long while. Then, almost pitiful, it said, *But my brothers are still here.*

A pause. It took Megatron a moment to realize that it meant the tales of the Gods' War were true, and a terrible sympathy rushed over him. The Matrix accepted it.

"We will all lose brothers," he said bluntly. "Somehow, I suspect yours are more hardy than most. Let me save our people. Don't torment me with fears of the past. We will survive this." He vented, although he hardly needed to, in the green twilight he floated in, and said, "I have chosen compassion once. I know what I am and what I want to be, and that is why I am glad of my choice, though the price will be steep. Perhaps you should have chosen Orion. Perhaps you should have chosen someone innately good. Someone without this rage. Someone without cruelty, but you didn't. And because I know myself as myself, because I know the pleasure of destroying my enemies, and I have the rage to want it above all things, *I can choose otherwise.* What does a gentle, kind mech do when he's faced with that anger, that ability for the first time? Can he really choose in such a way if he and his darkness have never been on speaking terms, or does he act on those impulses and call it righteousness? Tell me, what becomes of him then?"

There was a long, still pause.

He becomes Optimus.

Megatron had never known that pity and hatred could mix in such equal measure, but they did, and he bowed his helm at the realization.

So, the Matrix said, slow and sad. *We seek a future among the stars.*

"No," said Megatron. "*We will have* a future among the stars."

Chapter 112

Cybertron fell.

It was the work of centuries. But still, it fell. And it was worse than Megatron could have imagined.

The Autobot death toll was also far worse than he'd imagined. Prowl had predicted a high mortality rate. It was different, hearing that prediction, and seeing the names come in every morning with the casualty report.

Worse still was when the names stopped coming, and simply became neighborhoods. Then cities. One after another, falling. Fallen. Occupied. Purged. Gone.

But it was balanced by the reports from the growing Autobot bases, ancient, deserted Cybertronian outposts on deserted worlds. The Decepticons had their own interplanetary interests as well, but Megatron was correct. As long as he was on Cybertron, there Optimus's attention stayed. They were formulating strategies about what to do if Optimus followed them offworld, but their head start on fortification meant they had a far better chance. And they were all sure that the bulk of the Decepticon strategy would rest on fortifying Cybertron once they had it.

There were times that Megatron looked back at that last night he'd spent with Jazz and Prowl on the roof as a still, waiting moment before the storm hit, the last gasp of normalcy before the world descended into chaos and horror. Things like energon puffs were far in the past, as was the ability to look up at the sky and see stars; the Decepticons were burning as they came, and the smoke turned the light orange and dull by day and took the stars by night, a constant acrid tang in every ventilation. In the last few days, even the base's filtration systems couldn't keep it entirely out, and the engineering team under Wheeljack was cursing it as they added a last series of modifications to the Ark to allow it to launch safely despite it.

They could see the lights of the Decepticon army by night, now, as they camped around the edges of what had been Iacon. The devastation that they had passed on their way into the city at the beginning of the war had been only partially repaired before attention turned to demolishing the damaged buildings for resources rather than rebuilding them. That effort, too, had been abandoned as Decepticon bombing raids had carried the devastation deep into the city.

Megatron looked down at the strategy table. It didn't work as well anymore. Nothing here worked as well anymore.

Prowl came up beside him. "We have the confirmation ping from the garrison," he said, meaning that the small group of people who'd volunteered to remain behind, to maintain a presence on Cybertron and monitor Decepticon activity, had arrived at their destination. Megatron and Jazz had seen them off personally the day previous; every last one of those mecha was probably going to their death and deserved no less.

"Let's get the crew aboard, then," said Megatron. "I'll keep the frontliners with me; we'll buy you time and keep Optimus distracted. The sooner I get aboard that ship, the sooner the Decepticons start shooting at it."

"Agreed," said Prowl, and Jazz joined them, staring down at the occasionally-fritzing hologram, the seethe of purple around them. "And we'll be with you."

Megatron frowned at them. "That's not strategically sound."

"We're not leaving you behind," said Jazz. "We're not giving you the chance to get left behind. If we're out there with you, there's no chance that you'll pull that. Worst case, Wheeljack's pretty sure they can grab us with like, a grappling hook. He says it won't be fun, so try not to make it the worst case."

"Engines are already cycling up," Prowl said. "We'll be ready for launch in the next three hours. We're seeing activity in the Decepticon encampment; there's no way they're not reading those emissions."

"Have you got Ratchet aboard?" asked Megatron.

"Yes. He's fragged off it happened before they could get the new class of medics through their board exams. At least we'll be well-crewed in that aspect, until they disembark on the stations that need them."

"Let's make sure we don't need all their skills," said Megatron, with a pang of sympathy for the students; they were the first full class who were mostly heavy-labor frames like himself. First Aid might have put out the call for more of them, he might have thrown his political weight as Prime behind it, but medics in general were a conservative bunch and even Ratchet's rage hadn't hurried things enough to get them to their exams until now.

The exams Megatron had never taken.

He was, in a way, envious of them, envious that every one of them would stand as Ratchet painted their full medic's insignia on their shoulder pauldrons. And it *would* be Ratchet, in person, even if he had to stand on a box to reach them, and he would make it clear he was terribly proud of each and every one of them.

His part in the ceremony would be dispensing congratulations as Prime, and he would have given anything for their positions to be reversed, to have attained a rank as medic instead.

The Matrix hummed something between comfort and admonishment at him when he thought that. It was right. He had his duty. "Then let's get down there."

"We're getting energon surges from the Autobot base," said Starscream. "I think they've got another one of those generation ships squirreled away in there."

"Correction," said Shockwave, and Optimus wished he wouldn't be so smug when he corrected Starscream; Starscream invariably took it badly. "The readings we're getting are far stronger than any other Autobot ship yet recorded. Not only is that their method of escape, but it is also, very likely, a brand-new advance in Autobot spaceflight technology."

"It's just like Megatron to wait until he has the best of a technology to use it for himself," Optimus said. "Very well. We'd better prevent it launching. Megatron may think he can escape justice. We will have to disabuse him of that notion."

"And we have one other advantage," said Starscream. "Tarn is ready. Megatron may be able to tell he's not Terminus... but if it buys us even a moment of hesitation, it will be worth it."

"Do it," said Optimus. Let Megatron be confronted by the ghost of the lover he'd murdered so deliberately. Sometimes, Optimus still saw Megatron bearing down upon him with his features twisted in insane rage, and it still scraped grief over his spark, even if now he had Starscream.

Starscream who had his flaws, it was true, but did love him in turn.

He listened to the plans for attack with only half his mind on what he was hearing. He thought of Megatron, who in his rage, his desire to justify himself at the expense of the world, had backed himself into a corner. Had found himself utterly surrounded and brought to bay, like a mad thing that needed putting down.

He would have a trial. And it would be fair. And at the end of it, he would pay. It would hurt Optimus to the depths of his spark to ensure it, but he would pass and carry out the sentence himself. No one else deserved to bear that burden, and Megatron should have been stopped far earlier. It would have been within his power to do it, too. If he had simply shot him for his treason after Soundwave uncovered it. If, before that, he had been sterner with him, not allowed him his little indulgences.

But that was all in the past. And at the very least, Optimus could correct his errors now. He would deal with Megatron. He would deal with Megatron so that their planet, their people, could be saved and could move on, for there would be no peace while Megatron was free or alive. As long as he could draw a ventilation, so too did the Functionists.

After Megatron was dead, they could free the Autobots from his thrall. And Optimus would take the Matrix. It was clear it needed someone with uncommon strength of will to bear it, and where Megatron had faltered, he would have to succeed. When he had the Matrix, there would be peace.

This one last battle, and then peace.

The others left. Starscream moved in close. Optimus looked down at him, seeing the affectionate curl of his mouth. "How does it feel?"

"How does what feel?" Optimus asked.

"One last battle and Cybertron is yours," said Starscream. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"I'm only sorry we haven't been able to stop Megatron until now," said Optimus. "He's caused so much pain. So much suffering."

"He'll pay," said Starscream. "We'll make sure of it."

Sometimes Optimus envied Starscream his vengeful streak. It turned the world so much simpler. It offered some kind of reparation for the horrors they'd both seen.

"A kiss?" Starscream asked. Demanded, rather. "Before our victory?"

Optimus bent and kissed him, pulling his warm supple body into his arms. There was a world of difference between holding him and Megatron. Starscream at least was honest in what he was. Honest in his desire and respect. Optimus held him tight.

"No matter what happens today, we're going to win," said Starscream, low and fierce. "You're going to *win*, Optimus."

Optimus held him tight, then relaxed his hold a little to trace his cheek and jaw with his fingers. He looked into Starscream's optics. "Be careful of yourself," he murmured. "It will be no victory at all without you by my side."

Starscream's smile outshone the brilliance of the sun, and it made Optimus glad.

The Decepticon attack came within two hours. Megatron stood and watched them coming, feeling the rage of his comrades humming around him. The Decepticons had taken their home. Their friends. Briefly, Megatron thought it was a pity Rodimus had missed this. He would have loved it. But he'd gone on ahead with Ultra Magnus—newly recovered from injuries even Ratchet was amazed he'd survived, but Ultra Magnus seemed to have an incredible ability to return from the nearly-dead—and most of the Wreckers to one of the bases closest to Cybertron. He was needed there, as Megatron was needed here. He'd probably find a new way to run his rescue missions.

Two Wreckers had stayed; Impactor had refused to be reassigned, wanting to see things through here, and Drift had likewise refused to leave his post as Ratchet's bodyguard. He was, hopefully, aboard the Ark awaiting takeoff.

The Decepticons advanced on their position. Megatron settled his ion cannon in his hands and watched them approach, glad of Jazz and Prowl alongside him. Unsurprisingly, Optimus was in the lead. Still more unsurprisingly, the moment he transformed to speak with them, the whine of jet engines from above cut out and Starscream dropped out of the sky to land next to him.

"It's over, Megatron. Surrender is your only option."

"Been practicing that in the mirror, have you?" Megatron sneered.

Optimus's expression of stern disapproval only grew stronger. "You joke about the lives of your people," he said.

"Because in your hands they would be a joke," said Megatron. "Freedom is the right of all sentient beings. And the mecha who stand with me would rather die here with their weapons in hand and the enemy in front of them than at what you would call your mercy."

"Every one of you would have a trial," Optimus said. "We are not monsters who would simply—"

"You are, and you would," said Megatron, drawing himself up. "And I will not leave a single Cybertronian in your power who has not chosen to be there."

"See, there's your mistake," said Starscream with a smirk. "You're not getting the chance to leave at all. You're going to answer for your crimes, Megatron."

"So be it," said Megatron, and leveled his weapon, aiming a blast squarely at the fusion cannon on Optimus's arm. "Autobots, attack!"

It was so much fun fighting alongside his lovers. Jazz laughed as he darted up behind one of Megatron's attackers and stabbed the mech through the spark, moving on before he even fell. Then to Prowl, a quick set of steps around each other and a lunge as they offlined each other's opponents, falling easily back to guard Megatron's flanks and back. The line was holding, but Optimus was advancing; they'd have to get out of grabbing range before he and Megatron closed, because the other Decepticons weren't above grabbing Megatron Prime's partners as leverage.

Megatron was fun to watch because he obviously loved fighting so much, and it was pretty sexy to watch him grab Optimus by the wrist and stop his first blow dead, or punch a Decepticon so hard the mech went flying through two walls one after the other, demolishing them as he went.

It was like his whole body was made for this, and he reveled in every second of it.

Prowl didn't like fighting. His dislike actually meant he was brilliant at it, figuring out how to put an enemy down with the fewest movements possible. He'd avoid, duck and weave, and then strike. Any foe he touched went down and stayed down.

Jazz... just tried to compliment both of them, taking out anyone who got too close while their attention was distracted. It worked pretty well until he came up against Starscream.

He ducked the first clawing hand. He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice this time. Starscream snarled at him, wings up high and pleased, but this wasn't a semi-deserted factory, and Jazz knew even more nasty tricks than he had at the beginning of the war. He wasn't distracted this time by Pharma, either.

"You think this is going to go any better for you than it did last time?" Starscream taunted, drawing a sword. Jazz frowned; he preferred short knives, which was really not ideal if you couldn't get up in under your opponent's guard, and the second he did that, Starscream's claws would come into play.

Time to stay out of the way. Occupy the fragger so he couldn't aim at Megatron or Prowl. Jazz danced back, staying out of range of the sword but keeping close enough Starscream wouldn't start blasting with his null rays.

"Come on," said Starscream, grinning. "Scared of a rematch?"

Jazz slipped a knife down from under his armor, taking the blade between thumb and forefinger. Generally, he didn't advocate for throwing away a perfectly good knife. Generally, however, he didn't fight Starscream.

Megatron and Optimus were to their left. Prowl was directly behind him. Jazz saw Starscream move and leaped out of the way, rolling with his shoulder as he came back up, and threw the knife in the same movement. It struck Starscream's wrist plating, deeply enough to stick in the wound for a moment before falling out again. Starscream screeched and dropped the sword. "You two-bit shareware!"

Jazz said nothing. Now was not the time to taunt. He needed Starscream kept back. Ideally, they needed to keep the fragger out of battle for the immediate future. He glanced at Prowl; Prowl caught his optic, saw what was going on.

Starscream shot at him. Jazz cursed and rolled, trying to turn him so his back was to Prowl, and darted in at him. Starscream's claws drove him back. He knew how they could rip into a mech's chest cavity and wasn't inclined to try it again. Inwardly, he was pretty sure that any fight between him and Starscream would be a draw at best.

"Coward," Starscream said, low and poisonous. "You're a spy, though. Guess that's a plus in your line of work. Can't believe Megatron let you between his legs, but then again, he spreads them for everyone anyway."

Jazz cocked an optic ridge under his visor. Starscream thought calling his partner a whore was going to torque him off enough to do something stupid? Megatron had been called much worse. And nothing Starscream could say could torque Jazz off more than he already was. These fraggers were going to drive them off their own damn planet. Everything else sort of took a backseat to that.

Behind Starscream, Prowl closed in.

Jazz had to distract him. "Optimus seems a bit stupid for *your* tastes, Screamer," he said. "Could say the same about you and him."

It did hit a nerve. Starscream snarled and lunged at him, and Prowl moved in the same gesture, drawing his knife across the back of Starscream's knee, effectively dropping him and cutting the fuel line to his right thruster in the same gesture. He would have followed up to make it deadly, too, except another Decepticon ploughed into him from the side, and Jazz hurdled Starscream's body to get to him soon enough, stabbing the mech in the back and slitting his throat in two short gestures.

Starscream was down for now, and that was enough.

Somewhere, Starscream was yelling. Megatron paid it no mind, his world narrowed down to trading blows with Optimus.

Fighting him hadn't gotten any easier. If anything, it had gotten harder as they'd gotten to know each other better.

Suddenly, Jazz and Prowl were at his side, driving Optimus back with him. It might not have been a fair fight, but Megatron didn't give a frag about that. He was just glad of the help.

"It's time to retreat," Jazz told him. "Engines are up. Fallback plan initiated."

"Understood," said Megatron, and raised his voice. "Autobots, retreat!"

He saw Optimus's optics widen. "Megatron, you coward!"

"I have higher priorities than your opinion of me," Megatron told him, falling back with Jazz and Prowl at his side. He started blasting at Decepticons attacking other Autobots, clearing the route to retreat as he did. "Autobots, to me!"

They obeyed, orderly and calm. Megatron was immensely proud of them. He kept himself in the rear, letting Jazz and Prowl herd them through the building as he laid down cover fire. His ion cannon couldn't match Optimus's fusion cannon, but it did its job well enough and no Decepticon wanted to step voluntarily in the path of a bolt.

But there was a familiar figure behind Optimus now, purple and big, baleful red optics behind a purple mask. Megatron drew in a horrified vent, staring, a half-second of disbelief.

That couldn't be Terminus. Terminus was dead. He knew it. He'd felt him die. He'd dreamed of him dying more nights than not, in that first year. He couldn't be—

He started blasting again, refusing to allow the Autobots to suffer for his moment of shock. Tarn wasn't Terminus, he told himself. Tarn wasn't. Trepan *had* changed him. And Terminus had hidden so much from Megatron himself. They weren't the same person.

He kept his optic on the other mech behind Optimus. It was hard to tell in a battle, at this distance. But it seemed to him the mech didn't move right. That he didn't hold himself like the old

Tarn. The Terminus Megatron had known. He had to believe that.

The Decepticons pressed on, following them into the base, and a third familiar figure joined Optimus. There was none of the emotion this time. Overlord had been his first kill, nothing more, and the memory of Overlord's hands on him was a pale shade compared to the horror of Tarn's trusted hands turned cruel.

Overlord was supposed to have frightened him even more. Instead, he only made Megatron angry. He *knew* Overlord was dead. He'd seen him gutter. Any method of bringing the two of them back in any form must have been intensive in both time and resources. A waste to—to what, frighten him?

He was not the entirety of the Autobot Cause. And he was not *frightened*.

Tarn and Overlord might have been ghosts of his past, but they were ghosts because he'd slain them.

Megatron gave them all a mocking salute with his axe. "Why, Optimus, I didn't realize you were so afraid of me you needed *bodyguards*," he called. "Pick some better ones next time. It won't do you any good to hide behind mecha I've already defeated."

Optimus's optics narrowed with anger. That much was worth it.

"Autobots, fall back," Megatron ordered, because his taunt had caused the mecha behind him to pause in their retreat. Impactor was snickering. "They're waiting on us."

Jazz, beside him, let out a sudden hiss of triumph. "Mir just reported in. Mission complete. He's got everyone and they're away from the Decepticon line."

There was an explosion from behind enemy lines, followed by another. "And mission successful," said Megatron, swinging his axe to drive back an overeager Decepticon. "I'm assuming that was the enemy artillery."

Jazz was counting the bangs under his breath. "They got five out of seven," he said. "We can deal with that. Let's hope Mirage gets his people back in time." Another shuddering crash and gout of flame. "Damn. Six of seven. Granted, one of those fragging things can do a lot of damage..."

"We'll be lucky to have that problem," said Prowl. "It'll mean we'll be back on the Ark and off the ground. Megatron, reports from our left flank show they're trying to cut us off there. Ark garrison can't reach us to reinforce."

"Impactor, take some of your heavy-hitters and reinforce the left," said Megatron, not turning around. "I'll stay here and draw their fire." They'd planned for the possibility of getting surrounded. It wasn't a good one.

There was a crash behind them.

Prowl bent his head, listening intently to his comm. "We've got an aerial assault on the base," he said. "They're trying to collapse it behind us."

"Then it's time to hurry." Megatron laid down a heavy barrage of cover fire, hearing the clatter of everyone else speeding their retreat. There was a small group of bots running flat out toward them; Mirage's team, done with stealth and preferring speed. The Decepticons weren't doing too well shooting at them; no one else had Mirage's ability to become completely invisible, but

they all had various camouflage mods.

They streamed past him into the base. "Is that everyone?" Megatron asked.

"Yes," said Prowl. "All accounted for. We have some wounded, but there's no one left out there."

"Good," said Megatron, and raised his blaster to shoot the exit closed. Let Tarn and Overlord dig through *that* to get at them. "How's our left flank doing?"

"Impactor says they're holding."

Step by step they retreated. It wasn't that far, but it seemed like forever. Around them, the building shuddered under the combined attacks of the Seekers above and the Decepticons tearing away the rubble of the entrance. Megatron was focused on that, so the Decepticon who came at him from the side got a good shot in across his abdomen. He whirled with a roar, grabbing the mech's helm one handed and shooting him through the chest.

They were fighting again, this time in darkness, illuminated only by their optics and headlights. There was so much dust in the air that the light made little difference, and a lot of mecha, Decepticon and Autobot alike, were coughing even as they tried to tear each other's sparks out.

The building shuddered again under a fresh salvo. High above, something creaked, and Megatron's instincts—still acutely sensitive to a cave-in after all these years—had him throwing himself forward to shelter Prowl, a pace to his side. There was a small Decepticon between them. By accident more than intention Megatron came down across him as well, shielding both of the other mecha from the support beam that caught him a horrible glancing blow across his shoulders and upper back. He grunted with pain as it scraped a layer of paint and metal as it slid down, but he had been built to survive cave-ins. He'd had worse.

There was a silence after that crash. Megatron looked at Prowl, saw he was okay, and then realized there was someone else under him. He looked down into golden optics, a small orange mech with tan plating and a prominent chin who stared back at him with complete and utter shock.

"You saved my life?" he quavered.

I assure you, it was an accident was what Megatron wanted to say. But he hesitated before saying it, because there were better ways to use this. "Every Cybertronian life is precious," he said instead, while Prowl aimed his weapon at the Decepticon, probably all too aware of how easily the little mech could slip a knife into Megatron's abdominal plating. "Tell me, what is your name?"

Prowl shot him an irritated, questioning look.

"Fulcrum?"

"Well, Fulcrum, perhaps you should rethink your choice of friends." Megatron staggered to his feet again, feeling the energon trickling down his back. The main bulk of their forces had continued the retreat. Behind them, there was a sudden rush of wind and light—the Decepticons had pried open the collapsed entrance. "Prowl, we should be going."

"Indeed," said Prowl, aiming a shot at someone behind Megatron. "*Quickly*, sir."

Megatron obeyed, though not without a glance back at the confused little genericon who was still sitting in the corridor. He made no move to follow them, but no move to shoot them

either.

"We may just have to kill him at another time," Prowl said as they ran. "That was very likely a waste."

"Not if it makes him hesitate before taking a shot at an Autobot first," Megatron said. They had to scramble over debris, Megatron boosting Prowl and then hoisting himself over as well, before they arrived in the hangar.

The bulk of the attack force was aboard. But the Decepticons were close behind. Megatron leapt onto the ramp and turned to fire at the Decepticons scrambling over the debris at the entrance of the hangar. Overlord was in the lead, smirking, with Tarn and Optimus close behind. Megatron's first shot splashed harmlessly off his armor. Megatron frowned. Someone had decided to upgrade him, apparently. His next shot hit Overlord in the optic, which at least blinded him for a moment. Tarn was behind him, a double-barreled monstrosity of a cannon mounted on his arm. He shoved the reeling Overlord aside, or tried to—Overlord didn't actually move much, and fired back.

There were yells from behind Megatron as the shot scorched the ceiling inside the loading bay, and return fire whizzed by his cheek—Bluestreak had flung himself flat and was returning fire. Someone else launched himself out of the ship, driving fast, a streak of pale turquoise. Overlord startled, grabbed for him, but the mech was well out of reach.

The Ark had started to lift off. Megatron grabbed one of the massive pistons supporting the loading ramp and held out a hand; the Autobot launched himself into the air and grabbed his arm. Blurr, the mech he'd rescued in Polyhex, looking grimly satisfied with himself.

He had cause, Megatron realized—that had been a bomb he'd stuck on Overlord, and the massive mech yelled as it went off.

"Well done," Megatron said. "I think we'd better have a conversation with Jazz about transferring you to Spec-Ops."

Blurr grinned at him, then grabbed the lip of the loading ramp to vault up, flipping in midair as he did. "Thank you, sir. How about you get under cover now? Pretty sure the conversation I have with Jazz won't be too pleasant if you don't."

Megatron scrambled back at the *thoom* of Optimus's fusion cannon below, just in time; the metal of the loading ramp where he'd knelt glowed red as a blast hit it from below. "Perhaps so," he said, and retreated.

He dared a glance back; Optimus, far below, firing shot after shot after the ship before lowering his cannon and roaring, "*Prime!*" after them.

Megatron stood, watching, as the door closed away his view. He wondered, briefly, how much of Optimus's rage against the Autobots was due to the Autobots themselves, or to a more personal hatred.

Then he shrugged and went into the ship. Either way, he didn't care. He wasn't fighting because of Optimus.

"Can't they hold it *steady*?" demanded Ratchet, his hands flying as he worked in the chassis of one of the wounded Autobots. "Did they let Rodimus pilot this fragging thing?"

Drift was standing by the entrance to the surgical bay, armed and green around the cheek-

vents. He was pointedly looking away from what Ratchet was doing. "It's artillery fire," he said.

"Well maybe they should try and make most of that *miss* us," said Ratchet. "Fragging hell, I've got work to do here."

His tank was churning with terror with every swoop of the ship, every noise and shudder. He was *glad* this was a complex surgery. Otherwise he'd not just be looking sick, he would have *been* sick. "If we're off the ground, can't you and your fragoff big blaster get out of my surgery?"

"No. They might board us," said Drift. "I'm not leaving you, doc."

"Board us. In midair. Like anyone actually does that," said Ratchet, clamping a line. "Dammit!" Another bounce tugged the clamp out of his hand. "I didn't want to go to space anyway," he complained. "There's too much stuff that can kill you out there."

"As versus a planet full of people who *will* kill you down there?" Drift said. "Seriously Doc, I get it, you're scared. We're gonna be okay."

"Reassure me again and the hemostat goes down your throat," said Ratchet, "and I deal with these Decepticons that are supposed to board us."

"Your choice," said Drift. Kid was probably rolling his optics.

"And don't call me Doc! Bad enough I have some afthole in my medbay with a gun..." The bantering helped, though. He was focused on it and the patient, not what it would feel like when the Ark dropped from the sky like a chunk of scrap. "There! All right, he's stable." He looked at the intern across the operating table, one of the miners, massive and grayer than usual with worry. "All right, Crusher, you close up. Don't worry, you've done this a thousand times, though not on some maniac's idea of a carnival ride." The ship bounced to the side, as if to illustrate his point. "You're going to be Dr. Crusher after tomorrow, in any case, and you're gonna have worse slag than this to deal with."

Crusher gave him an attempt at a grin and went to work, his hands steady despite his worry. Ratchet watched, pleased when he had no corrections.

The ship bounced and lurched again. "All right, let's get him into recovery," said Ratchet. "Next!"

Drift obviously hated it, which was funny because it wasn't like the mech hadn't been shooting people into very small pieces for a while there, and it wasn't like he'd given that up. He'd just decided to *slice* people into very small pieces instead, presumably to keep Ratchet safe. It was kind of cute in the same way a feral turbofox was. Someone was going to get bit, probably not you, probably because of you.

But even though it freaked him out, he was still here. Ratchet could appreciate that.

The ship bucked under their feet. Ratchet swallowed hard. "Come on, kid," he called to Drift, "say something irritating. You're good at it."

Drift laughed, apparently seeing right through him. "Should I lead you in a prayer to Primus?" he asked. "Seems like you could use it. It's supposed to be very calming—"

"Not *that* irritating!" said Ratchet, but he felt himself smiling as he said it.

Optimus stood in the blasted hangar, staring up at the streak of light and cloud that was all there was left of the Autobot ship. Starscream, supported by his trine, limped to join him.

"Good riddance," he said. "I wish we'd killed him, but at least we still won." He thought about the Academy of Sciences. They could rebuild it. With him as Chancellor of the University. He liked that idea.

They could rebuild Vos.

Optimus was still staring upward. Starscream admired him a long moment, the line of his audial fins, the brilliance of his optics. The deceptively sensual lips he knew to be hidden behind the battlemask.

"We should go home," he said. "Rebuild. Megatron got away—so what? We have Cybertron. A new life for our people."

Optimus said nothing.

"We didn't have a future while he was still around here," said Starscream. "Still a rallying point. Now, he and his Autobots are scattered to the stars. No one here's going to care about them, no matter how much they like them, which they won't. They're hardly the Knights of Cybertron, and look how much of a frag most people give about *them*. None. Let's rebuild, Optimus."

Optimus slowly looked down at him, and Starscream shrank back a little at his gaze. It wasn't *right*. He'd seen implacable rage on Optimus's faceplate before, when Megatron had left the first time. Now, it was worse.

If he'd ever needed confirmation that Megatron still meant more to Optimus than he did, this was it.

"Let's go home, Optimus," he said, and his voice wavered on it as if he were actually pleading. He was angry with himself for that. How could he still be pleading when his answer was right there, in Optimus's face.

"Freedom will only be a distant dream so long as Megatron lives," said Optimus, as if he believed each and every syllable. Starscream could have wept. "We cannot let him continue to be free and ravage the universe. He must be stopped. He and the Autobot contagion must be contained."

"What the frag." Starscream shook off Thundercracker and Skywarp. "We have the planet. You promised us *peace*. We can be so much better than them. We should rebuild. Then we can go after them! Instead of—" he waved a hand at the destruction, the smoke and settling dust. "We fought this war for a reason, Optimus, didn't we?"

"Megatron is a threat to all sentient life," Optimus said. "We would be remiss to ignore his dealings with the wider universe—"

"We don't need the wider universe, we need our home!" It was like the Academy again, that horrible humiliating day where nothing he said, nothing he did, was going to stop what was happening. The Decepticons, the Cause, Optimus, all careened out of his grip, control sliding away as if he'd never had it, as if he were right back there on the worst day of his life, as if he hadn't been the one to kill the Functionists and the Senate, as if he hadn't led the war that had driven the Autobots offworld. And if he were right back there, what was it all for?

How could he live with the fall of Vos, if he were right back where he started?

"Starscream, you're being illogical," said Optimus, stepping toward him and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down. You must know that—"

Starscream blasted him in the chest with his nullrays, both at once. Optimus staggered back, a smoking crater in his armor that hadn't touched anything vital yet, but Starscream blasted him again in the shoulder. "Frag you! You shouldn't be leading! *I* should be leading!"

He staggered forward, nullrays still leveled. The troops around them were all too startled to intervene, and Starscream raised his voice. He wanted *everyone* to hear this. If he had to be so solidly proven wrong about Optimus, everyone else had to lose their idol too. Everyone else had to have their sparks broken along with him.

"You won't listen to me! You just want to go after him. You just want to prove that you're *better* than he is! That it isn't just an act, you playing at being him, the same revolutionary, but better.

"You know what we need to get clear? You're not him. You're not going to be him. And your mecha are never going to love you like the Autobots love Megatron, and for the same fragging reason." Optimus had stopped trying to rise, staring at him in frank amazement. "It's because when things go to slag? Megatron is there for his mecha. He believes them, and he believes in them, and he'll fight for them no matter what, no matter the rivers of energon he spills, no matter if he needs to wade knee-deep through our corpses, they're *his*, and he'll *fight for them* until he's fragging well *dead*, and maybe even *after*. You? You're still a cop under all that, and half your army are just criminals to you. You'll never believe us, much less believe *in* us, and at best we're a useful tool to an end, and I don't even know what that is. Some kind of orderly world? Nice and stratified, once again? Only, most of this army wonders where you'd put them in that new grand Decepticon taxonomy. Up at the top like they've fought for? Or right back down where they started, because their own leader, their own *Lord Optimus*, looked at them and found them wanting—for what? They don't even know. *I* don't even know. And I'm done putting up with it and cleaning your messes and turning reality into something you can fragging stomach. I'm done, because you're here choosing him and your own glory over *us*!

"You don't deserve us, Optimus. You don't deserve to lead the Decepticons. *I do*."

Optimus raised his arm. Starscream saw the blast coming too late, too wrapped up in his own sparkbreak, the cleanser clouding his vision, his disappointment and his rage that he'd trusted enough to *be* disappointed.

It lifted him off his feet. He screamed as heat too intense scorched his side and his wing and his arm, turning them to nothing but pain. He hit the ground, vents driven out of him, turned his head to find his wing gone, his arm like something had taken a huge circular bite out of it, the edges slagged and blackened, and Optimus was coming toward him. Starscream spat energon at him. "*You failed us!*" he screamed, a new ugly grating sound in his voice. "Optimus, you *failed us!*"

Optimus looked down at him, calm and grieved, and said, "Starscream, you're hysterical. Your injuries are punishment enough for your foolishness, but you mustn't do this again." He looked away, dismissing him to call for the medics. Saying he needed his Air Commander functional again, and Starscream turned his face into the rubble and sobbed with loss and with humiliation.

Chapter 113

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Preliminary intelligence suggests that Optimus does indeed plan to follow us," said Prowl. "Or more precisely, you."

Megatron stared at the viewscreen, the darkness ahead of them. It didn't show Cybertron, Cybertron was behind them, rapidly fading into just one more dot in the starfield. Grief clutched at his spark, his own and the Matrix. "We have a better chance of fighting him when we've picked the battlefield," he said, sounding weary to his own audials. It was better than voicing his real thoughts. *So this was all for nothing.*

He didn't need the Matrix to remind him that this was his own choice. That if he hadn't saved Ratchet, if he had killed Optimus, they wouldn't be fleeing their own home with an army on their heels.

He bowed his helm. Some days, it was difficult to believe it had been the right choice. But he still couldn't see having made any other.

"Megatron," said Jazz, quiet, "it's not your fault."

Megatron snorted. "My decisions led us here. Optimus's obsession with me led him to follow. There is no universe in which I do not bear a substantial portion of this burden."

"You got us out," Jazz said. "The war will go on, yes, and it's followed us, yes, but we're not back there. We're not in their hands. The vast majority of the Autobots are free and safe. And your decisions made it possible."

They stared at the stars a little while, and Jazz and Prowl's hands slid over his own, comforting. Protective, not confining. It had taken him so long to be able to trust in that, no matter how he loved them. No matter how he cared for them. There had been, at first, too many terrible memories, of Tarn. They had understood. It was what had let him relax at last, and let them touch his hands, that understanding. Even now, the mere act of handholding felt to him far more intimate than interface. It was an earned, difficult trust.

Jazz tilted his helm against Megatron's shoulder. "We don't have any pursuers yet," he said. "We'll be within strike range of the nearest Autobot outpost before they can catch up to us. Let's head to bed. Ratchet wants to see you in the morning—looks like they finished up the surgeries shortly after we left orbit."

"I was going to ask how he'd managed to get three hours on my schedule directly after we fled the planet," said Megatron.

Jazz and Prowl traded a smug look across his chest. "Why don't you go and see in the morning?"

They had to be plotting something. Megatron favored them with a deeply suspicious look, which they returned with absolute innocence, obviously determined to betray nothing.

"Let's fuel and go to bed," said Prowl, affectionate. "Triple check none of us lost any important parts in that last fight."

There was a palpable air of relief to the ship, now they were underway. Megatron would have expected more grief, with their homeward fading behind them. But no, it was relief, like everyone had been waiting with bated vents for this moment and now it was here and not nearly as terrible as they'd all feared. There were smiles and laughter, some of it a little too loud, some of it genuine.

The mess hall was simple but cheerful, cobbled together out of spare materials by mecha who liked a sense of home and were well aware they'd have to live in it for an extended period of time. Someone had even used scraps from building the table to make a sort of sculpture on one wall, abstract and brightly painted with what, if one looked closely, was the left-over paint from the ship itself, the energon-pinks and bright teals, reds, and greens of various signage. Megatron wasn't sure what he thought of it, but Sunstreaker had been very proud, and it definitely made the room feel less institutional. It probably would have made a *morgue* feel less institutional.

"Megatron Prime," said Tyrest, by his elbow. "A moment of your time?"

"Of course," said Megatron, as Jazz and Prowl split away to find something to eat.

"Our retreat from Cybertron has played well in the intergalactic community," said Tyrest. "It's solidified our position that the Decepticons are the aggressors. For species with only a tenuous grasp of Cybertronian politics, we've taken on the role of a legitimate government in exile, even if your Ascendence was... nontraditional. While the Galactic Council itself is loathe to become involved in the affairs of 'mechanicals'—their terminology, not mine—this tentative support is strategically significant. Most any move the Decepticons make at this juncture will be viewed with suspicion, and that's if they respect the sovereignty of other species while they establish their own centers of operations. Given their previous behavior and the fact we now occupy most of the better-preserved and unoccupied facilities from earlier Cybertronian imperial expansions, I suspect that will be unlikely."

"So we've essentially exported our war."

"And, perhaps, gained new allies." Tyrest looked down into his drink with hooded optics. "I think... there may be something to be said for attempting to broker a treaty setting out rules of engagement and at least attempting to protect other species from aggression. I have some ideas; we would need an enforcer for them."

Megatron raised his optic ridges. "Do you have someone in mind?"

"Ultra Magnus," said Tyrest.

"Hm. Minimus Ambus also has a good processor for that sort of thing. You should consult him."

There was a slight hesitation in Tyrest's manner. Then he nodded. "I have some ideas for Minimus's involvement, should he be interested. Have a good evening, Megatron Prime."

He drifted away as Jazz and Prowl returned, bearing fuel. Megatron spent a moment looking down into it, foolishly missing the early days in Iacon and the full-stocked shelves of additives. Then he drank it, because it was still good and pure, strong with a touch of pleasant sweetness that lingered on the glossa. He'd drunk worse before. He would probably drink worse again, if the war kept going the way it was.

"Dominus and Rewind are over there," said Prowl. "We should spend a moment speaking to them."

Megatron nodded; Dominus was scheduled to depart on the first leg of a deep-cover mission once

they put into port, the specifics of which even he didn't know. Whether Dominus had shared that information with Rewind, and to what extent he'd shared it, was between the two of them. Megatron hoped he had.

Over in one corner, Drift and Ratchet sat, Ratchet grumbling animatedly about something and totally missing the smitten, worshipping expression on Drift's face; the moment Ratchet actually turned his attention to Drift, Drift said something flippant about auras loud enough even Megatron caught it, and Ratchet's plating fluffed up with outrage.

Megatron hid a smile in his fuel. If Drift thought getting himself slagged was a good way to flirt, far be it from Megatron to correct him. Ratchet loved a good argument anyway.

They spent some time talking to Dominus and Rewind, to Bumblebee, to Blurr and all the others. Comforting and calming where it was needed, laughing elsewhere—it was good to see them relying on one another, the trust and friendship of long hardship for a purpose. Tonight could have been so much worse; the abandoning of their world for an unknown future should have gutted all of them, but here they were dealing with it well because they were together and it was not hopeless.

For that, Megatron knew he, too, could take some credit. Primus knew he'd reiterated it often enough, that this was a new beginning and not a defeat.

So he followed Jazz and Prowl around and encouraged his mecha and breathed in the relief he felt, the well-earned rest. They were free and they had not lost too many, and his mecha were in decent spirits.

"Hey," said Ratchet as they were leaving, a hand on Jazz's arm. "Make sure the kid sleeps, huh? He's gonna need it."

What the frag was that about? There was a wicked glint in Ratchet's optic, an answering smile on Jazz's face.

He had to let them have their little jokes. Megatron followed the insistent tug of Prowl's hand into the hallway and from there to their quarters.

There was an immense comfort to it, being made to feel treasured and sought after, even more so to not have any obligations save relaxing into his bindings and taking the pleasure given to him.

They were being gentle with him tonight, smoothing hands over his trembling frame and leaning up to capture his mouth with sweet kisses. Megatron went gentle and limp on them in turn, letting them roll him over and spread him wide. He was alive. They were alive. It wasn't his fault.

Prowl urged his aft up a little, sinking inside him with a sigh of bliss. Jazz pet at Prowl's doorwings, clever hands easing tension and making Prowl shudder, something Megatron could feel where their bodies joined. He breathed something close to a moan, long and soft, and Prowl's hips moved deep inside him, one stroke, then another. He reached down to touch Megatron's valve, slowly working another finger inside of him. Megatron's gasp took on an eager sound at that. He wanted both of them.

Prowl eased him open, just a little at a time, a slow warm pleasure building, then turned them a little so Jazz could press up against Megatron's back and ease himself in as well. Megatron stilled, vents hitching and optics wide, stretched wide almost to the point of pain, a delicious feeling of satiation.

They'd done this before, and it always thrilled him. It felt like an absolute surrender, his bound frame used for their pleasure, and that alone, both of them greedily taking.

The ropes they'd gently wound around his body were both comforting and absolving, an illusion that let him yield without feeling that he'd betrayed himself. He didn't always need them; on days his courage was strong, he could ask and obey, but there were times he wanted and couldn't entirely face it. Like right now, in the wake of something that felt like a vicious defeat and wasn't, not really, and that didn't make it better.

He closed his optics and lost himself to sensation, and afterward, when they'd untied him and cleaned him up and praised him, he tugged them both close and simply held them, so glad for it after such a time of one thing after another torn from him. The emotion built in him, a growing realization that he no longer feared a spark merge as he had. No longer felt tainted by Tarn or the Matrix. The Matrix had become his ally; Tarn was dead.

He vented deeply, both of them draped over his front. He realized, too, how close they might have come to death in that last hectic plunge toward the ship.

They could tell when he was thinking. Prowl leaned his chin on Megatron's chest and looked at him, just waiting, thoughtful.

"I...think I might be open to a sparkmerge," Megatron said at last.

Neither of them said anything, just kept looking at him. They knew that sometimes he understated something at first, gauging reactions.

"I would like to sparkmerge," he said then. "Tonight. With both of you."

Jazz pushed himself up to kiss Megatron, long and gentle. "I'd be so happy," he said. "But you understand, if you choose not to share your spark at all, we're both gonna support that, right?"

"I want to," said Megatron. "I'm tired of the ghosts of my past dictating what I can and cannot do. I want you. I want you both."

Prowl smiled. "And we want you, too," he said. "Your trust means a very great deal to both of us, Megatron. It's not a gift either of us is going to accept lightly."

Megatron found himself chuckling a little at that, before leaning in to kiss him. "Enough."

He wanted this. And he wanted some kind of a victory from the day, even if it was only over his own fears. He opened his chestplates, layers sliding carefully apart, then carefully shifting the Matrix open to expose his own spark. It was—it was surprisingly hard, sitting here with his sparkchamber open to them, feeling them looking at it. He was acutely aware of the contrast between new and old, his original sparkchamber patched with new metal and the new-milled iris aperture at the front, the clear evidence of what the last mech he'd opened to had done with that confidence. Whether they recoiled from the horror of that mutilation or in fear of the thing he wanted to give them, the weight of his trust in the wake of that cruelty, it would hurt a very great deal.

But Jazz was looking at his face with gentle affection and folding away his own chestplates, showing his sparkchamber in turn, a somewhat more faded patchwork of repairs. "Your work's still holding up," he quipped, and Megatron's anxiety faded. He wasn't alone.

Next to them, Prowl quietly opened as well, the only unscarred sparkchamber among the three of them. He was the first of them to open the protective iris, the blue of his spark washing into the

room. Megatron stared briefly, enchanted by the sight, so much of Prowl in a brilliant shifting orb of light. He was beautiful.

He opened as well, letting his own spotlight wash over them. Jazz opened up at the same time, like it was a race, with a little laugh and a flare of his visor.

There were so many things that could have happened to take them from each other today. But none of them had happened. They were all here today, all alive.

Megatron wanted this, even with the ghost of fear, the ghost of the feeling of Tarn over and on him and in him and how he'd struggled to get away and the terrible complete helplessness of it.

Jazz petted at his arm, bringing him back to the present. "You all right there, love?"

Megatron nodded. "Yes. I want this."

"It will take some maneuvering," said Prowl, sounding a little amused. "Here, Jazz, could you duck down and—yes."

The subsequent logistics of getting all three of their sparks close enough without the plating getting in the way broke the tension, reminding Megatron beyond all doubt who he was with tonight. He relaxed, then gasped as the first wisps of Prowl's spark brushed his, joined quickly by Jazz's.

He felt his own spark reach for them in turn, a leaning with all his soul, the sense of the both of them tangling around his own awareness, gentle and delighted, sinking faster and faster into one another. He had the shapes of them in his mind, smells and touch and taste and emotion, a tangle of senses that made a being in one's processor, and this was—this was like adding something else, a profound impression that filled in the gaps, made them solid and real. He was still there but they filled his world.

They loved him.

It was a deep certainty. It chased away any fear he'd had otherwise, the moments of doubt, the fear he'd let them down in one way or another. The foolish fears of any relationship withered away under this intimacy, and he could simply be there and drown in them, know himself to already be, in their eyes, the person he wanted to be for them. It was the affirmation of care and love and value that he found in submission, but on a far greater scale.

And better still he knew them to be gaining the same comfort from him. He closed his optics, settling into it, reaching for them to give them that as strongly as he could. It was like a hot oil bath, comfort sinking into joints that he hadn't realized ached.

There could be no lies in a merge.

Dimly, as it began to unravel a little at a time, he realized that some part of him had been bracing for hurt. It had never come.

"And it's not gonna," said Jazz, recovering fastest. He'd caught that edge of thought as they separated, it seemed. "You hear me, Megs? It's not gonna. We love you."

Megatron smiled and pulled them both close. "I know," he said, and he did. It seemed his spark beat more easily within him, now. "I know," he said again. "Thank you."

"Time to go to bed," said Prowl, firmly. He pulled them both down next to him, curling around them. Megatron fancied he caught a flicker of his contentment and relief. It was a good feeling. He

tucked Prowl in under his arm more firmly.

“Thank you,” Jazz said aloud, a shared thought between the three of them. “Also, I think if we count up all the slag that’s gone on since we met, we’re pretty much all conjunxes now if we wanna be. Just a thought, if we ever feel like doing anything with that.”

Megatron thought about that. “I don’t give either of you nearly enough presents,” he said dryly. “You practically bring me fuel every evening.”

“You’ve done the same for us,” said Prowl. “It’s just more likely one of us is off shift before you are.” He curled under Megatron’s arm.

Jazz laughed softly in the dimness. “You know what, we’re a little unbalanced toward acts of Devotion. We seem to be doing that a lot.”

Prowl snorted gracelessly. “Our non-linear courtship has been inefficient, yes.”

Megatron thought about it and found himself smiling. Shared secrets, so many intimate moments, gifts of fuel and books, and how could the three of them all pulling each other back from the brink over and over again count as anything but an Act of Devotion? Jazz, coming to rescue him from Tarn.

Jazz and Prowl together pulling him back, bringing him to save Ratchet even if it meant the loss of Cybertron itself.

“No reason not to make it official sometime,” Jazz said. “Cons already know, what with one thing and another. We’ve got the resources. Just need the time.”

“Yes. Time,” said Megatron, dryly. “Which we have a very great deal of.”

They were both looking at him, fond and thoughtful, and Megatron imagined, briefly, standing up in front of their crew and pledging themselves to one another, Ratchet being the one to weave the cords between them, red and gold for luck and prosperity. Somewhere on the ship, the arm-guards and collar and helm net of Messatinian rubies sat in a small case, one of the few little treasures rescued along the great historical ones, saved only because, by the time the Autobots had been desperate enough to sell them for supplies, they would have bought little indeed. It would be... nice to wear them at such an event. An event that meant something to him, not that he was obligated to attend.

(The idea of wearing them later, of being a beautiful thing for his conjunx in private, made his spark swoop in a pleasant way).

But the part of him that didn’t like pomp and ceremony rebelled. They were conjunx in every way that mattered already. So what if they were missing a ceremony? Something official, entered into the database. Maybe one day. Maybe when it became too profound a want to ignore. Or when everyone would really benefit from a touch of normalcy, their commanders pledging their lives to one another.

But it wasn’t urgent.

They were off Cybertron.

They had all the time they needed.

“I might like that, someday,” he told them. “But we have time. I’m happy to use it. We’ve already

done what matters.”

Jazz chuckled. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

Megatron smiled, and fell asleep nestled between them, pleasantly sore in a comfortable berth.

Megatron found himself rapidly chivvied out of berth and their quarters the next morning by an expectant Jazz and Prowl. As far as he knew, he was just meeting with Ratchet, but he felt a certain suspicion growing in response to their urgency. Suspicion of *what* was a good question, but it was suspicion nevertheless.

On his way to the medical bay, he came upon Rung, who was strolling along the corridor with ration in one hand and a datapad in the other, looking thoughtful. Megatron smiled, seeing him. Rung had a way of making sure things just... worked. Megatron had grown to very much appreciate that over the last centuries, even if he didn't see Rung as often in his professional capacity these days. Outside of the medical staff, that was; Megatron thought, with a pang, of their graduating class of medical students. Ratchet was in with the last of them right now, helping administer the final oral examination, something more ceremonial than anything—written exams had been passed a few weeks ago.

“Ah. Megatron. I'm glad to see you.” Rung tilted his face up to look at him, smiling. “How are you?”

“Alive,” Megatron said. Rung had probably heard worse in the last day. “You?”

“The same, and glad of it.” Rung was still hurrying to keep up, so Megatron shortened his stride. “How is the Matrix taking our departure from Cybertron? You mentioned being concerned about it.”

“It's... sad,” said Megatron, and paused by a viewport, feeling the all-too-familiar tug of grief in his chest, and also a burgeoning sort of urgency, a recognition of the mech standing next to him. “We've spoken about religion before, Rung,” he said, guessing at the right thing to say and feeling the Matrix settle as he said it—that probably meant he was right. “Do you think there's truth to the myth of the Guiding Hand?”

Rung hummed a noncommittal note. “Do you feel your experiences with the Matrix indicate such a thing?”

Megatron's hand came up to his chest. “Perhaps,” he said slowly. “It has... said some things, when I have communed with it, that make it seem like more than a simple artifact. Sentient.”

Rung hesitated between one step and the next. “How so?”

“It didn't want to leave Cybertron,” said Megatron, “because it said its siblings were still there.”

Rung stopped, tugging his glasses off and looked up at Megatron sharply, with something like a grieved recognition. A growing realization, reluctant and unpleasant. The Matrix shifted in Megatron's chest; he let out a hiss of breath and pressed his fist over it.

All of Rung's focus came down on him, sharp-edged and almost unpleasant, something terribly like the Matrix in his chest, not a twin to that sensation but a changed reflection, like looking down into a mercury pool, the surface rippling. Megatron found himself stopping, looking down at the little mech in front of him and the clarity of his gaze.

“We did not leave them behind,” said Rung, utterly certain.

Then the certainty ebbed from his gaze, and Megatron could almost *feel* the memory of that odd statement trying to slide from his processor, but the Matrix had seized on it like a starving thing on a shard of crystallized energon. Rung blinked at him, then hurriedly

pushed his glasses back onto his face, his face settling back into its usual thoughtful, pleasant expression, now tinged with confusion.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what came over me. What were we talking about?”

The Matrix held to the memory, worrying at it, even if Megatron found the particulars of the statement difficult to remember already. He frowned. “We were talking about the Matrix,” he said.

“Ah. Yes,” said Rung. “I’m glad the two of you are on better terms. Is it still giving you nightmares?” He began walking again, sweeping Megatron up in conversation. The memory of something odd in the interaction lingered, something nauseating and unsettling, but even that had begun to fade when Rung bade him farewell outside of the medical bay.

“Good luck with the new medics,” said Rung in parting, and there was an extra weight to it. Megatron frowned at him, not sure what to be suspicious *of*. Rung simply smiled.

Megatron watched him go, and the Matrix inside him hummed a deep contentment, though why, it wouldn’t share.

He found the medical bay empty and quiet when he arrived. Ratchet was near the door, arranging instruments to be autoclaved himself, a job he usually hated. He looked up and smiled, tired and pleased, when Megatron entered the room. “So we made it through all that atrocious piloting, did we?”

“I’m pretty sure we’d both be less tired in the Allspark,” said Megatron dryly. “You and Drift seem to be settling in.”

“Sweet kid,” said Ratchet. “Has the stupidest ideas, though.” His voice didn’t quite come off as dismissive enough. Megatron very carefully did not smile. “Speaking of which, we’d better not be late.”

Megatron followed him as he hurried to the small conference room they’d been using for the exams—normally, it would have been a place for medics to debate patient cases in some kind of confidentiality. “I thought you were done for the day.”

Ratchet paused with his hand on the door, then looked over his shoulder with a worryingly wicked grin. “Remember your most recent field tech recertification exam?”

It had been unusually hard. He approved of that; just because they were letting more people learn to become medics didn’t mean they could relax their standards. “Yes?”

Ratchet’s grin widened. “Remember how I insisted on you doing it early?”

“Yes,” said Megatron, frowning at him.

“It wasn’t the recertification exam,” Ratchet said. “It was the written portion of the final medical exam.”

Things fell into place, Jazz and Prowl insisting he leave on time, Rung’s smile.

“You just need your orals,” said Ratchet, still grinning.

“But the Oath,” said Megatron, a little weakly. Anxiety and longing twined together within him.

“I asked Tyrest,” said Ratchet. “No oath you can swear supersedes that of a Prime to his people.” He met Megatron’s optics. “You’re not going to be an oathbreaker, Megatron, despite this war. They’ve modified the Oath, too, to recognize that medics and their patients are sometimes targeted by the enemy. You’re all right.” His throat cabling worked. His voice went rough. “You can have this.”

He swung the door open, paused.

“I know you could have done with more warning,” he said. “But I’ve seen you do some of your best thinking in tight spaces. When cornered. You’ve been a field tech throughout the war, Megatron, and you saved my life. You can do this.”

Megatron nodded to him, a short jerky movement, and stepped inside. Ratchet closed the door behind him.

Of course. He’d recused himself. He wouldn’t want any hint that Megatron hadn’t honestly earned this. Never mind that they were, both of them, in a very different position than they had been when this all began; it mattered to Ratchet to have Megatron be certified in a way that left no doubt.

Megatron felt a great fond pulse of affection, realizing that. Then he stepped forward, onto the pressure pad that activated his cameras in the holo-meeting, squaring his shoulders.

This time, all that stood between him and the dream he’d cherished for so long was his own ability. That, he could accept. That was all he’d ever wished for.

He didn’t recognize most of the medics in front of him. That was, again, for the better. Even if most people had warning, time to study, for this. Megatron realized he somewhat preferred it this way. There was none of the terrible anticipation he remembered from his time at the academy. Even with his mind fully under his own control, he had no desire to revisit that sensation.

He had far more field experience than any of the people who’d just had their own examinations. Ratchet had kept him supplied with readings, making sure he was up to date in the field—even as Cybertronian society had crumbled around them, Ratchet had never stopped teaching.

He was ready for this.

“Megatron Prime,” said the lead examiner. “You come before us today to present your knowledge and make the case for your acceptance into the ranks of Cybertron’s medics. Your mentor, Ratchet of Vaporex, has advanced your name to this committee, stating that you have shown...” the lead examiner looked down at the datapad before him and raised his optic ridges, “*exceptional* proficiency in the field, and you have fulfilled the requirements set forth for the written examination.”

Megatron’s spark whirled faster with excitement. He’d *dreamed* of these words. He’d *dreamed* of this chance, just *having this chance*. His hands, steady on his axe when he faced thousands of Decepticons, when he faced Optimus and the nightmares of his past, trembled. The fulfillment of a dream was harder to bear by far.

“Are you indeed the aforementioned mech?” the examiner asked, a traditional question. They did not ask for your ID in these final examinations. You were a medic, a member of one of the highest echelons of Cybertronian society. Your word was your bond, your honor a more absolute thing

than any mere identity chip or sequence.

It was a stupid, classist thing of the past, but *Primus*, how he reveled in it in the moment. He felt a little ashamed of it, but there was a hungry part of him that remembered the mines far too well, and it seized on that in a way it hadn't even when he became Prime, because this—this was through the work of his own hands and his own mind, and not chance. And this wasn't about someone trying to control him.

"I am," he said aloud.

"Good." The lead examiner made a mark on the datapad. "We will begin with fundamentals. Then the diagnostics, then surgery, and a discussion of your research. Kaput, would you care to begin?"

The first section wasn't too difficult. It was a simple test of memorization. Megatron's mind wandered a little as he answered questions like what certain medications were used for, and how various injuries and diseases presented. Then Ratchet's favorite, the diagnostics, though they didn't pull that favorite trick of Ratchet's, the description of symptoms with no known correlation to see if he'd admit he didn't know. From there, they moved on to descriptions of surgical procedures, how he might modify them to accommodate different frame types, different abnormalities in forging or construction.

He'd been doing this with Ratchet all along. It wasn't anything new. It was challenging, and he thought briefly with a pang of how difficult it would have been with Trepan's work still trapping his thoughts, but he could do it—and he might have been able to do it then, even though it would have taken far more work.

"I see here that you've undertaken an unusual quantity of research as a technician and have a number of published papers," the lead examiner said. "I particularly want to draw this committee's attention to your battlefield surgical techniques. Please describe the initial surgery you performed, along with the applications you foresee for the procedure."

Megatron vented deeply, tank twisting in abrupt anxiety. He knew damn well that he hadn't exactly adhered to best practices. He hadn't been *able* to.

Still, shoving a fuel pump from a fresh corpse into your patient wasn't exactly an acceptable transplant procedure.

Most of his papers had focused on ways to run your patient's systems off your own.

He took a deep vent.

"The patient had been attacked from behind by a Deception frontliner with heavily modified and armored digits. The entry point was between the eighth and ninth thoracic vertebral struts: the exit wound was ventral, in the mid-upper third of the sternal guard. The result was a mixture of deep internal lacerations and blunt force trauma to internal organs and the patient's neuroelectric systems. Shards of the spinal struts were present throughout the injury.

"The immediate danger was due to four aspects of the injury. The first: two digits had grazed the sparkchamber, excising a triangular section roughly a decimeter in length and half a decimeter in width. The second: the fuel pump had been crushed and driven upward into the patient's ventral armor, tearing free of the descending vena cava and aortal hoses. The third: the fuel tank had been breached. The fourth aspect was the aforementioned severe damage to the neuroelectric systems, which had caused severe sparking. The damage to the fuel system resulted in an excessive quantity of energon in the thoracic cavity, which was at risk of being ignited by the electrical systems.

“I began by absorbing the energon and patching the tank, hoses, and removing the damaged fuel pump. In order to maintain adequate fuel pressure, I set up a direct energon transfer between myself and my patient. I then spliced and capped the electrical systems.” Sometime in there, Ratchet’s energon had actually ignited, but Megatron was fairly sure the committee would not be impressed with his method of putting it out. “I smothered fires as necessary.

“The patient was not stable enough for transport to a medical facility, and no medical facility was proximal enough. Resources were limited. Nanite death on the extremities was already evident; the traumatic nature of the injury had created sluggish diffusion across the distal vascularization, and the pressure supplied by a single fuel pump was insufficient under the circumstances. Scavenging of the immediate area yielded a fuel pump of an acceptably,” *barely*, Megatron added to himself, “compatible model. I flushed it with clean energon and installed it, but the patient’s energon levels were still low and continuing the energon transfer remained necessary. Further examination showed autonomic systems were also disregulated as a result of the neuroelectric damage, and beginning to decompensate. I established a hardline connection to synch them with my own systems. This made the patient stable enough for transport; I closed the wound with a temporary patch.

“Upon arrival at a formal medical facility, the patient was transferred to mechanical life support, and the fuel pump was removed and replaced with an appropriate model. The field patches were likewise removed, the injuries cleaned, and replaced with permanent welds. We then undertook a full systems flush in stages to clear system contaminants from the initial procedures; they were undertaken on the field and ideal operating conditions were neither present nor possible to achieve. We provided a scaffold framework for the neuroelectric systems, then placed the patient in a CR chamber at Critical Care Setting 5. The patient fully stabilized under these conditions, and was decanted ten days later. He has made a full recovery.”

The surgery sounded more and more insane every time he described it, the memories vivid, and the sense of triumph still more so.

“I cannot sufficiently stress the lack of ideal circumstances under which the surgery was undertaken,” Megatron said. “For the most part, it is a demonstration of luck. But the primary application is the systems regulation and fuel transfer; heavy models can tolerate fuel transfers for long periods of time and a medically-trained individual can run a patient’s systems off of their own as well, essentially rendering any heavy-framed medic capable of providing sustained life support on the field and in transport. The bulk of the research I have undertaken with Medic First Aid has been focused on modifications to allow a heavy-frame to provide life support in a more efficient and effective manner, including the ability to consciously increase fuel pump action in order to pressurize the energon system to a greater degree. This allows the practitioner to avoid the need for a field transplant with its attendant risks, and is achievable with minor rewiring of neuroelectric systems and the replacement of the pistons of the fuel pump with high-efficiency models with shuttle-grade gaskets. A bypass of the fuel filters is also recommended, as is present in some mining models, to ensure the practitioner does not suffer hypovolemic shock as a result of the process. Practitioners should of course submit to an energon-borne pathogens check on a weekly basis.”

There was a long pause.

One of the committee members let out a long vent. “And hence the push for labor-frame medics. That research—that surgery—has been the single most effective argument to date to further open medical programs to nontraditional frametypes. That alone, without accounting for the technical ability apparent in the surgery, is remarkable.”

The lead examiner glared at him. “May I remind the committee that we are still in the course of the examination?”

“Right,” said that committee member, embarrassed. “What aftereffects did you experience from providing prolonged life support of another mechanism?”

“Fatigue,” said Megatron. “A thorough examination afterward showed no damage sustained from the procedure itself.”

“Your statement implies there was damage from other sources present. How did you rule out the procedure as the source of that damage?”

“The damage from other sources was sustained during the battle itself,” said Megatron. “The procedure did not cause blunt force trauma, lacerations, or puncture wounds. The several Decepticons I fought earlier in the day did.”

“I see.” Someone made a note of that.

“Would you recommend an unmodified medic undertake this procedure?”

“Depends on frametype and fuel pump model,” Megatron said. “Models designed with excess throughput capacity should be able to handle it. Anyone without the ability to run their pump at least at 150% of normal operating capacity, no.”

“Greatest dangers of the procedure?”

“Systems contamination, and the effects of unnoticed injuries on the part of the practitioner.”

“Very good,” said the lead examiner. “That concludes the examination. We will temporarily close your end of the channel while we discuss the results.”

The holograms shut off, leaving Megatron standing there alone. He closed his optics, trying to vent through it, decrease the tension through every line. He could think of nothing but the moment, the silence around him, a feeling of stasis. There was no emotion *but* tension.

He had never believed this moment would come. *Could* come.

There was still the Oath. He still expected it to cause trouble. How couldn't it? You couldn't be a healer and a warrior. You either had a commitment to all life, or you didn't.

Though the same could be said of the Prime.

He waited.

An eternity later, the console chirped. The holograms flicked back into existence.

“Megatron Prime,” said the lead examiner. “This committee finds your knowledge and achievements qualify you for the rank of medic, junior class. While we recognize that the obligations of the Prime should technically supersede all others, it is the belief of this committee that you should still be administered the Oath, modified for our current circumstances. As a result of this war, it has become clear that medics must at times choose between nonviolence and the lives of their patients. The Cybertronian Medical Council has determined that under these circumstances, the life of one's patient must be a medic's first consideration.”

He paused. Megatron's spark was beating fast, all his emotion peaking at once.

“Please place your left hand over your spark and raise your right.”

He did. His chestplates felt hot. He could imagine the frantic excited whirl of his spark under them.

“Megatron of Tarn,” the lead examiner said. “Can you swear, before Primus and the people of Cybertron, that you will neither do harm nor willing allow harm to come to any patient under your care, regardless of faction, nor refuse treatment to any mechanism in need, regardless of faction, nor require compensation for the act of healing, for as long as you hold the title and honors due a medic?”

“I do so swear.” And he *could*. That was an oath he could uphold. He knew the right response. He had read it, longing, over and over and over again and even if this was a modified version... “I swear before Primus and the people of Cybertron, that I will neither do harm nor willing allow harm to come to any patient under my care, regardless of faction. Nor will I refuse treatment to any mechanism in need, regardless of faction, nor require compensation for the act of healing nor abuse the trust conferred upon me as a healer, for as long as I hold the title and honors due a medic. May Mortilis strike me if I betray this oath; may my title and honor be stripped from me; may the misery of a thousand ages be mine should I fail in this and the dishonor of oathbreaker be my title forever more should I make myself by action unworthy.”

“Then this committee confers upon you the title of medic, junior class,” said the lead examiner and at last smiled. “Congratulations, Megatron. Ratchet has said it’s well past time, and I don’t think there’s a mech here who would disagree with him. Hopefully, in happier times, we can get everyone to swear the proper Oath once again, but while the Decepticons are targeting our medics and their patients, all we can say is good luck, and be careful.

“The others are waiting outside.”

The other new medics were indeed waiting outside, mostly heavy frames, talking to each other about *what’s taking so long, I thought you were the last*, and then as the door shut behind Megatron they turned, staring. It was a moment before they realized what it meant, why he’d emerged from the conference room instead of coming in through the medbay. The silence continued for a vent, and then they let out a cheer, full-throated and excited, the sort of cheer they all would have avoided releasing in the mines, because it would have scared the supervisors. “We graduated with the *Prime*,” someone cried, delighted.

Megatron stepped further forward, grinning in response, and Ratchet and First Aid elbowed their way to the front of the crowd, First Aid carrying the box they’d all joked about Ratchet needing to reach everyone, Ratchet with a little pot of paint in his hands.

“Hold still,” he said gruffly, and Megatron held still as the box was put down in front of him and Ratchet climbed up on it, still clutching the paint and brush.

“I’m so proud of you,” he murmured. Megatron carefully didn’t flinch at the first cool smoothing of the brush over his shoulder. He wanted to savor the moment. He’d dreamed of it for so long, but here it was, running through his fingers like water and he was too overwhelmed to feel anything. Ratchet took his time painting it, small precise strokes; he wasn’t even using a stencil.

“I couldn’t bear the idea of you being left behind,” Ratchet said. “You paved the way for all of them, you know. If it weren’t for your work, they wouldn’t be here. It wouldn’t have been fair if you hadn’t gotten to be here, after that. You’ve done so much. Worked so hard. You deserve this, you deserve this so much.”

“The Functionists sent me to the Academy and to you in the hopes I would fail,” Megatron murmured, looking at the other new medics in front of him. “They hoped I would close the door on all of them. Make the mere idea of someone like me being a medic laughable at best, tragic at worst. You—everything you did—you stopped them before I even knew what had been done to me.”

Ratchet laughed softly, and when he withdrew to work on the insignia on Megatron’s other shoulder, Megatron saw his optics were wet with cleanser. “Most of that was you, kid. Most of that was you. I was just honored to help you.”

“You must stop giving yourself so little credit, Ratchet.” Megatron smiled down at him. “You were the greatest mentor and friend I could have asked for.”

“Aw, kid.” Ratchet actually sniffled a little, drawing back with brush still in hand to admire his work. “You know what, I won’t say anything else. I don’t want to ruin it.”

He added a last brushstroke and stepped down, then rubbed his forearm over his optics, still smiling. “You deserve this. You deserve this so much. You’re going to be one frag of a medic. You already are.”

Then he hugged Megatron, with no reserve, and Megatron, after a startled moment, hugged back. The smell of new paint was strong in his olfactory suite. He snuck a glance at them as soon as Ratchet stepped back, brilliant red against gray.

It didn’t feel real. He’d spent too much time wanting it. He’d spent too much time feeling like he’d never get it, like it wasn’t worth hoping for.

That terror of Ratchet’s disappointment wouldn’t be realized. That was the thing that really brought it home, gave him a flush of pride and relief and achievement. Ratchet had been so grieved when he’d set aside his hope to become a medic. Now, all that grief was turned to joy, and he could feel that in sympathy with Ratchet until he could feel it on his own behalf. He’d done this, against the odds, a day neither of them thought would come. Not until the end of the war, at least, and Megatron suspected to a certain degree that the chances of him seeing the end of the war were worse than either of them wanted to acknowledge.

But now, he’d become a medic. A junior one; only years of work as a certified medic would advance him from that. But *he was a medic*.

Prowl and Jazz pushed their way into the room then, both grinning. “How’d it go?” Jazz called.

“I passed!” Megatron said, though that was obvious, with the medical insignia on his shoulders. Jazz laughed and threw himself enthusiastically into his arms. Prowl paced forward more sedately, slotting himself in under Megatron’s arm gracefully, as if he belonged there. “There was never any doubt,” he said.

“How long did you know?” Megatron asked.

Jazz grinned. “Longer than I wanna admit. It wasn’t easy keeping quiet, but it was Ratchet’s idea. Didn’t wanna see you get left out of your own victory.”

“We’ll have plenty of time to celebrate later,” Prowl said, perfectly normally, but anticipation tightened in Megatron’s tanks all the same. “But I think you ought to congratulate the other new medics; it will mean a great deal to them.”

He was right, of course. Megatron looked back over his shoulder at the other medics, who were

trying to stare at them without staring and failing miserably. He smiled at both Jazz and Prowl and carefully disentangled himself. This was as much their triumph as his, enabled in part by their war, in part by the changes the Autobots as a whole had wrought in the terribly unjust society they had endured together for so long.

He went to them, wondering if he should feel a little shy. A little as if the long years he'd spent in a different world than that of the mines had somehow been a betrayal to them. Wondering if he was no longer one of their brothers, bound through the camaraderie of misery. If he had been too comfortable for too long.

He'd feared that when he'd made his decision to support the Autobots. That he would live a life in exile from those he understood, as so many of the Decepticons were from the most downtrodden of Cybertronian society—in part from their own justified anger, in part because they were the people who could not afford to flee ahead of Optimus's advance, and joined because they had no better option. But Megatron had seen need in the optics of the refugees who became the Autobots, had heard between Starscream's words the Decepticons' plans for them. Instead of aiming for the throat of an oppressive society, the Decepticons had aimed for the people just a little luckier than they; easier targets, and good targets, from the perspective of someone like Starscream, as it would leave the whole rotten system intact, ready to be taken over and remade to suit him. And he had gone to those people, made himself theirs, with little regret. They had needed him and no one else would speak for them.

But that one regret remained. That he'd closed himself away from the mecha who understood him. That he'd turned from his true comrades, his comrades for the first long terrible part of his life, the mecha who truly understood him.

So despite their shared victory, when he looked at the other miners and laborers there, his fellow new-made medics, despite all they had shared, something in him braced himself for rejection.

But it was to no purpose, for there was no rejection there. They looked at him with a sort of shy wonder, and when he reset his vocalizer, and said, "So. We have triumphed," they cheered before he could say anything else.

"*You* made the way," said one, grinning.

"This is still your doing," he said. "I am deeply glad to share this."

They grinned, arms pulled him in to the midst of them, and for once his words deserted him again for the sheer joy of it, the sheer acceptance, the rediscovery of this companionship. This was *their* hour, the true realization of the far away dream, not just to be a medic but to share it, to know others could follow and join him and here they all were together. He hadn't even imagined this. Dared to dream of this.

They were slapping his back and cheering, big heavy frames with their faces creased in delight and their medics' insignias bright and still drying on their shoulders, the camaraderie of the mines intact and accepting him in a world where they didn't have to live half of an existence for the convenience of those above them. He was surrounded by his comrades in the truest sense of the word, the mecha who had longed as he had. Trepan's shadowplay had sought to bury them in Megatron's failure, yet here they were with all their dreams realized.

He wasn't alone. He'd never been alone in spirit, at the least. He'd fought his battles as one of them and for them and they knew it. Now, in their shared triumph, they welcomed him home. To a world remade where they belonged.

Megatron looked up from the crowd, saw Ratchet and Jazz and Prowl there on the edges waiting, excluded by manners and custom and habit. Never mind that they had a hand in this as well. Never mind that they had suffered their own horrors in realizing this dream, never mind that the Functionists and the Decepticons had found their own ways to hurt them and to steal their hopes from them, turning them into torments instead of comforts. Never mind that they had braced him when he faltered, caught him when he fell. Never mind that they had done the same for the others.

They stood apart, sure that they did not belong.

Megatron reached to pull them in.

Chapter End Notes

I started this within a few months of starting my PhD.

I finished it two weeks and two days after my successful defense of said PhD.

Needless to say, there are a great many people to thank for their help over the course of a fic like this. My beta readers/captive audience/friends—you know who you are, and thank you for putting up with SIX GODDAMN YEARS of Echoes-related-queries, excerpts, and midnight panics. And graduate school queries, excerpts, and much, much more frequent midnight panics.

We are living through challenging times. I found writing this fic to be greatly comforting, but also a repository for my fears about the future—and my hope the ability of determined, caring people to thwart even the cruelest of intentions can never be overstated.

Have courage! Go forth. And thwart the absolute shit out of those bastards.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!